



MITRE COURT

MRS. RIDDELL





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MITRE COURT.

A Tale of the Great City.

BY

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“GEORGE GEITH OF FEN COURT,” “SUSAN DRUMMOND,”
ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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MITRE COURT.

CHAPTER I.

MR. AND MRS. JEFFLEY.

IN Fowkes' Buildings, hard by Great Tower Street, the curious reader may still see a large mansion which more than fifteen years ago was "run" as a lodging-house by Mrs. Maria Jeffley.

There never existed a woman better fitted for such an undertaking. Strong, energetic, tireless, capable, Mrs. Jeffley made the captains, mates, and various friends those seafaring persons brought to the "snuggest port" in London, perfectly happy. That at the same time she contrived to render Mr. Jeffley almost miserable was in the lady's

judgment a point not worth considering. Had he been differently constituted, his home ought to have seemed an abode of bliss to him—so the brisk Maria felt, and justly. *She* was not answerable for his constitution.

John—or, as his friends preferred to call him, Jack—Jeffley filled the position of warehouseman in the great firm of Deedes, Tunstall, Fulmer and Company, wine merchants, who had offices in Dunstan Hill, and huge vaults nearer to the Tower.

All their goods in those dim underground cellars were under his hand. The manager himself—who received a large salary and a percentage on the profits of the concern; lived in his own house (freehold) at Forest Hill, and gave dinner-parties, for which it was stated, by persons behind the scenes, Messrs. Deedes and Co. paid per arrangement; kept a phaeton and boy in buttons for his wife's gratification, and, generally speaking, “cut a dash”—was not really a more important factor in the firm's prosperity than plain Jack Jeffley, who only received a modest weekly wage, and the summit of

whose earthly ambition was a small cottage with a "bit of garden" which he might "keep to himself."

He could have realized this aspiration years previously had Mrs. Jeffley been of her husband's mind; but Mrs. Jeffley, as she not infrequently stated, had a different sort of mind altogether from the individual by a jocose fiction called her lord and master. The quiet of a cottage surrounded by a bit of garden would, so she declared, "kill her." *She* did not want to sit down and turn her dresses—she liked to buy new ones, and give them out to be made by Mrs. Mountly, who "fit her like a glove, and kept three apprentices, and a beautifully furnished house in Arbour Square (where the drawing-room was good enough for any lady in the land)."

Mrs. Jeffley "had no notion of letting *her* children go about as if they were beggars; *she* did not mind slaving and working *her* fingers to the bone" in order to send them on Sunday mornings with their rather abashed papa to their parish church of All Hallows, Barking, clad in

rich apparel—sunny ringlets streaming over their shoulders, and long, white, *real* ostrich feathers in their hats, which well-nigh drove the mothers of other children, no doubt quite as nice, distracted with envy.

Even had she wished to accompany Mr. Jeffley to church on Sunday mornings—which she certainly never did—Mrs. Jeffley with a “houseful of lodgers” might have found it difficult to gratify her desire. Sometimes, though not often, she repaired in the afternoon of the first day in the week to Hyde Park to see the latest novelty in dress or shame, equipage or beauty; and occasionally she attended evening service at the Abbey or St. Paul’s, squired by one or more of the many respectful admirers who never wearied of singing their landlady’s praises.

“The cleverest woman you’d meet in the length of a midsummer’s day!” was the chorus chanted by all Mrs. Jeffley’s lodgers.

In his heart Jack Jeffley often wished it had pleased God to make his wife a little less clever, but he was far too loyal to say so.

Silently he resigned himself to this dis-

pensation of Providence, as to several other troubles in his married life. If Mrs. Jeffley did not maintain a like silence concerning the cross of having a husband "without a morsel of push in him," it must be remembered she was a woman, and might have broken her heart had she not sought and obtained sympathy from the many, concerning the shortcomings of a man who let her do as she pleased, gave her almost all he earned, and only asked to be allowed to keep one little room, where he could sit and smoke and read the paper in peace and quietness.

"If you were like anybody else," Mrs. Jeffley frequently observed, "you might be of a lot of use to me."

In reply to which genial remark Jack Jeffley said nothing. He had the greatest genius for saying nothing, which was indeed well, since his wife's talent lay in quite another direction.

Though nominally master of the great house in Fowkes' Buildings, Mr. Jeffley was really merely a lodger in it, and a lodger less esteemed and considered than any other under the roof, not excepting Frank Scott

who, being a permanent inmate, young, poor, and easy tempered, ranked as one "of the family," and had to put up with being treated accordingly. His bedroom was next the slates, and if honest Jack had not made him free of his own small den, the young fellow must have confined himself to his narrow chamber, or consorted with rum-drinking and beer-swilling old salts, who, though excellent persons, no doubt, spat, swore, and told tough yarns, and whose conversation was rather apt to pall after a not very long period.

Thanks to a lawyer's clerk, to whom, when his fortunes were at low water, Mrs. Jeffley had been extremely kind, that lady discovered, long before the Married Women's Property Act became law, according to the "custom of the City of London" she could trade independent of her husband, sue and be sued, rent a house, carry on a business, "keep what she made for herself," exactly as if she had never seen John Jeffley.

This was before she started her boarding establishment, and, it is not uncharitable to conclude, the idea of having something free

from the control of the poor creature she had vowed to obey determined Mrs. Jeffley to persevere in her scheme.

Had Mr. Jeffley's consent and co-operation been necessary, sea captains and others must have found a suitable anchorage elsewhere. The whole project was abhorrent to him, if for no other reason than that already Mrs. Jeffley had a person occasionally lodging with her whom he hated as much as it was in his nature to hate anybody; he hated him for three reasons, not one of which will seem to a sensible reader sufficient to account for even a moderate dislike.

In the first place, Mr. Karl Katzen was a foreigner, and, like a loyal Englishman, Jack Jeffley distrusted foreigners; in the next, he was "undersized" and "unwholesome-looking," and Mr. Jeffley had a prejudice in favour of large men whose appearance did "credit to their keep."

"Katzen might be fed on chaff," he said in later years to Frank Scott, and indeed Mr. Katzen might have been fed on sawdust for any good his food seemed to do him. He was lean and sallow; he had eyes of no

colour in particular ; he let his dark lank hair grow long ; he wore no beard or moustache, only a starved imperial ; presumably he sometimes washed himself, yet he never looked clean. To big, burly Jack Jeffley, with his crisp brown hair, well-kept whiskers, clear complexion, tanned and freckled though it was ; frank mouth full of white good teeth, all of which he showed when he laughed, and heart that, though prejudiced, was full of the milk of human kindness, this inscrutable German was a standing affront.

For he had brains, such as they were ; and Jack Jeffley's head might have been cleft open without finding more than just served to enable him to fulfil his duty to his employers. He did not possess enough mind to make him even think of doing wrong. Fifty millions of money or money's worth might have been left at Jack Jeffley's mercy, and he would never have set himself to consider how easily he could abstract, say, a thousand pounds.

He was very stupid indeed, according to modern lights.

Two reasons, or non-reasons, have been

given why Mr. Jeffley disliked Mr. Katzen ; another remains behind. It is only fair to say Mr. Jeffley fought hard against it.

He argued that no better was to be expected "off" (truth compels the confession that thus Mrs. Jeffley's husband worded his sentence) "a fool of a foreigner," and consequently Jack really did try to forgive him, but he could not. Very often he fancied he had not merely forgiven but forgotten, and then suddenly the whole thing would recur to his memory, and at his work or walking along the street he again felt the hot blood rushing into his face, and tingling to his fingers' ends.

And really poor Mr. Katzen's offence ought not to have been regarded as the unpardonable sin. To Jack Jeffley, however, it seemed the same sort of crime that poisoning a fox would to a master of hounds.

Jack came in his way of well-to-do people. His father and his father's father had farmed their own land since the Conquest or thereabout. They were yeomen, they were never rich, or great, or grand. Nevertheless they

could trace a pedigree calculated to put to shame many a mushroom lord. They had fought for their country, they had poured out their blood for worthless kings they never saw, and died for principles they did not comprehend. Yet not one of them rose above the rank in which he was born ; titles and pensions, orders and bishoprics, are not for those who only perform yeomen's work ; rather as the years went on, and times changed—and the Jeffleys did not change with the times—matters grew worse with them.

Old acres did not mean the same profit as formerly. Though meat grew dearer, cattle did not return so much money ; labour had to be better paid ; the very earth seemed to yield her increase less willingly than of yore ;—it was thus it came to pass that, finding things drifting from bad to ruin, John Jeffley left home, and sought his fortune in London.

But before he did this, he had learned to love the country and all country pursuits, and though he trod the stony streets contentedly enough, his fancy was for ever

roaming along the field-paths of his native county; and as each spring returned to gladden the earth memory parted once again the interlacing branches which covered some bird's nest, while in the autumn days at heart he strode across his father's stubble once more, and raised his gun and brought down partridge and hare and pheasant on the land which had passed from him and his for ever. No man knew the points of a horse better than Jack Jeffley; he could ride well; when he took the reins, anyone might have felt secure in sitting beside him; he had the natural vanity a good driver feels; and yet once when he gave Mr. Katzen a lift in his employers' dogcart, that "blanked, blanked dirty little German," to modify his more vigorous expression concerning that gentleman, finding the vehicle between the Charybdis of an omnibus and the Scylla of a lumbering wool-van, actually gave the off-rein a pull which as nearly as possible "landed us in the very mess the fool was afraid of."

Anything else in reason Mr. Jeffley might have looked over, but the united cowardice

and unwisdom of Mr. Katzen's act stuck—to quote his own very words—"in his gizzard."

"How should you feel," he said to Mr. Frank Scott, "if a fellow—and that fellow a damned foreigner—laid his hands on the reins when you were driving? I wonder I did not pitch him neck and crop out of the cart."

And Mr. Frank Scott—who indeed knew as little about horses, and driving, and riding, except what he had learned from Mr. Jeffley himself, as a young gentleman could—was nevertheless sufficient of a friend and a Saxon to wonder how his host, smarting under such provocation, had forborne from crippling Mr. Katzen for life.

Mrs. Jeffley took a different view of the affair. "Bosh!" she said when her worser half tried to make her understand the full enormity of which "the damned foreigner" had been guilty. "You are nothing but a big baby."

And that was all the sympathy Jack Jeffley received from his wife.

Years had passed since that little episode, but when this story opens it still rankled in

Mr. Jeffley's heart. As has been said, he intuitively hated Mr. Katzen, wherein perhaps his instinct was not altogether wrong; but he dealt out injustice to Mrs. Jeffley's friend in imagining the German encouraged that estimable woman in her fads and fancies, and fostered those differences which were the plague of poor Jack's life.

Jack was but human, and never having understood his wife, it came natural to him to attribute those faults which rendered his home less comfortable than it might have been, to the influence of anything or anyone rather than to the nature of the divine Maria. Loyalty plays men and women many a scurvy trick, but never a worse one than that of attributing to external sources the fouling of a spring which contains in itself the elements of impurity.

Mr. Jeffley would not see the whole worry of his existence lay in his wife's mental vanity. She thought herself so extremely clever that all her husband's ways seemed utter foolishness in her eyes.

Many women who do nothing, fall into a similar error concerning their husbands'

business incompetence ; therefore it is perhaps not quite surprising that Mrs. Jeffley, who did a great deal, should regard her lord as a mere cumberer of the ground. This view of Mr. Jeffley, which had been growing and flourishing for many years, was entirely her own. Mr. Katzen's share in it was absolutely nil. He did not foster any depreciatory ideas on the subject of Mr. Jeffley's abilities—quite the contrary. He was wont to laugh a dry ungenial laugh and tell the lady she knew nothing about men, and men's work—that she was too well off—that if her husband beat her, or drank, or was unfaithful, she would love the ground on which his shadow fell. “ But,” Mr. Katzen was wont to continue, “ being only a good fellow, and devoted to you and his children, you can't find one pleasant word to say about him.”

There was indeed nothing Mr. Katzen had much less patience with than to hear Mrs. Jeffley holding forth concerning Mr. Jeffley's shortcomings. His own life was so stormy out of doors he loved peace within. He had no idea of disturbing his host's conjugal peace.

“Bah!” he would declare to Mrs. Jeffley, speaking between jest and earnest, “much as I like you, my friend, deeply grateful to you as I am and ought to be, I would not marry you were you hung with diamonds.”

“That is because you are so clever yourself,” Mrs. Jeffley would answer in foolish explanation. Then Mr. Katzen was wont to look in the lady’s face with a dubious smile, and remark :

“Dear madame, you are not half so clever as you imagine. All those stupid old Nephews are leading you quite astray—not of malice prepense perhaps, but they gaze at you through spectacles of self-interest ; you cannot expect your lodgers to tell the truth when you make them so comfortable.”

“No one, at all events, can accuse you of flattery,” Mrs. Jeffley often retorted.

“That is because I have far too great a regard for you,” was the plausible explanation ; and indeed, so far as Mr. Katzen was capable of feeling a regard for anyone, he did entertain some sentiment of the kind for the woman who had always believed in, and stuck fast to him through all sorts of chances

and changes—trusted and helped him, and given sympathy as well as many much more tangible proofs of confidence and friendship.

Still, it was a bore that she would not conciliate her husband. How comfortable and friendly they might all have been together in Jack Jeffley's little den, where Mr. Katzen never could flatter himself Jack felt glad to welcome anyone except Frank Scott! How useful Mr. Jeffley might have been to him in a hundred ways! How much better a man's help than a woman's! How far preferable the assistance of a rational male creature than any amount of kindness from a lady who needed the most skilful handling, who believed herself a diplomatist, a general, an administrator, and a financier!

"She thinks because she can manage her house that she could rule a kingdom," thought Mr. Katzen, with a shrug of his lean shoulders; "but there, she is a good soul, though a vain simpleton. Over and over again, my Karl, you might have known what it was to lack a meal—many meals—but for the amazing faith of Maria Jeffley. And she has found no cause to repent her confidence.

No, there may be, as report states, people I have not paid, but Mrs. Jeffley is not among the number."

Either report must have lied horribly, or else Mr. Katzen in the course of his life had paid very few people indeed. In many places there was an opinion he discharged no debt he could evade, and as we are often told there is never smoke without fire, it is quite probable that Mr. Katzen's erratic course through this wicked world might have been traced by the smouldering fires of unliquidated liability.

Under his rightful name of Karl Katzenstein, he had in his days of comparative innocence involved himself in such pecuniary trouble that he was compelled to leave his Fatherland and seek better fortune in the United States, where both he and those who trusted him fared badly. After all, a man must learn his trade somehow ; and if Mr. Katzenstein found but little gold stick to his fingers while serving his apprenticeship as adventurer, who can judge him harshly on that account ? He gained skill and experience ; and finally, thinking he had acquired

as much knowledge as America was likely to teach him, he decided to bid that country farewell, and give Great Britain the benefit of his talents. It was then he made Mrs. Jeffley's acquaintance, and a very useful one he found her. Many a time he must have gone out breakfastless in the morning, and repaired to bed supperless at night, if the lady's faith in him had not been unbounded.

And he never cheated her, never once. No, though he often went away for months together, he always came back and discharged his debt.

He told her many of his troubles, discoursed to her concerning some of his plans—a man must have some one to talk to—and Mrs. Jeffley's sympathy with the German was so complete he found it better to talk to her than anybody else.

She thought him the cleverest person in the world. He could speak five languages fluently, and had a smattering of Russian besides; and poor Mrs. Jeffley, who could only utter her thoughts in English, and English often not the most correct, considered the way Mr. Katzen—he deemed it well, for

reasons which it is unnecessary here to state, to dock his name of the final "stein" when he took passage for England—was able to discourse with persons of many nationalities little short of miraculous. It seemed to her simple mind as good as conjuring; and though she was honest herself as the day, the tricks by which he could get money "where another man would starve" excited her warmest admiration. She knew she found it hard enough to make both ends meet on Jack's regular wages. How Mr. Katzen could go out some days without a sixpence and come back with full pockets struck her as most extraordinary. Here was a person whose acquaintance was indeed something to be proud of. "Ah! if poor Jack had been like him!" Mrs. Jeffley would probably not have started her lodging-house, of which Mr. Katzen was so honoured an inmate.

What did she not get for his benefit?—a "tasty morsel" for breakfast; a good juicy steak for dinner, which Mr. Katzen kindly ate, though under protest, "because," as he said, "you do so spoil your excellent beef by your barbarous cookery"—"A fellow, I'll

be bound," grumbled Jack Jeffley, "who never got anything better than sour cabbage and kickshaws in his own country!"—fruit by the bushel, pastry light and flaky, puddings cunningly concocted; literally it was with Mrs. Jeffley a labour of love, catering for his excellent appetite. Peas for him were always dressed with sugar; the salads he affected were smothered in oil, "till they were not fit for a dog," again to quote Mr. Jeffley, while according to the same authority "it was enough to make a man do something desperate" to see trout boiled, and boiled with vinegar. At the time we first meet them, Mr. Jeffley had long ceased to express his opinions to Mrs. Jeffley concerning the d——d German, but he held to them very firmly notwithstanding.

A person without an ostensible calling, who had no regular employment and no business anybody could comprehend, who was scarcely ever in his office, if a "bit of a box stolen off the landing" in a house close at hand "could be called an office," about which Mr. Jeffley had his doubts, was never likely to do much good for himself or anybody else;

and what he, Jack, wanted to know was, why he should be waited upon "hand and foot" as if he were Rothschild or the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Jack was sadly jealous of Mr. Katzen. But he need not have been. Karl's attachment to Mrs. Jeffley was strictly platonic, and perhaps a little gastronomic, while Mrs. Jeffley's feeling for him entertained no thought of disloyalty to her husband. Naturally she did not care to hear Mr. Katzen sing the praises of any other woman, but that was nothing. As a rule, even men are not fond of hearing their acquaintances extolled, considering commendation of this sort a species of indirect reproach to themselves. In this respect there is not much difference between one sex and another, and for that matter not a great deal to choose between animals and human beings. At heart most persons feel the same sort of pleasure in hearing anyone else extolled that a dog does in seeing a cat stroked, only civilization has taught us to dissemble our feelings, while the dog gives tongue to his in the frankest manner.

Mrs. Jeffley, somewhat after the fashion of an animal, allowed her discontent to evidence itself, and Mr. Katzen often took an unamiable pleasure in stroking her fur the wrong way.

He knew his friend thoroughly—knew exactly what would annoy and what gratify her; and more than half his apparently careless utterances had a point and meaning in them unintelligible to outsiders.

John Jeffley felt, however, many of the German's remarks held a sting, and though he was not clever enough to perceive exactly where the sting lay, he resented them for his wife's sake.

"If she could only see the little wasp as I see him," he thought, "she'd know he is not an insect ought to be buzzing about a respectable house."

The years had come, and the years had gone, however, and on Whit Monday, eighteen hundred and sixty odd, Mr. Katzen was still "buzzing about" Fowkes' Buildings in a very persistent manner.

For some time affairs with him had been at very low tide indeed; but for Mrs. Jeffley's timely help he must have raised money on his

watch and ring, massive chain and diamond studs, breastpin, and various other articles by which he set great store, and which, indeed, poor Jack Jeffley's wife believed reflected credit on the establishment. She had heard Mr. Katzen's valuables remarked upon, appraised, envied, and she often did wish, "that she did," her husband's nature contained a spark of ambition. "We might all be so differently off," she considered, "and John have as fine a ring as Karl Katzen, to say nothing of my seeing some chance of leisure, instead of working my fingers to the bone in Fowkes' Buildings."

No one wanted Mrs. Jeffley to work her fingers to the bone anywhere; but this was one of the many little fictions which enabled the ill-used lady to pose as a martyr before the eyes of admiring friends.

Mr. Jeffley and Frank Scott had employed their rare holiday in visiting a friend who farmed a little land near East Ham, and as twilight was drawing in, they found themselves on their way home once more in Great Tower Street, a trifle tired, perhaps, but in good order and condition.

Their playtime was over, but they had enjoyed it thoroughly. Frank Scott carried a huge bunch of flowers that scented the road and filled the hearts of passers-by with envy, while Jack bore a basket containing a precious freight of new-laid eggs and golden butter, which he meant to keep for his own table, and give share to "no captain, or mate, or scrubby foreigner on earth."

He had for the sixth time repeated this determination with great energy, when an unexpected sight met his eyes. Coming leisurely along Great Tower Street from the City, he beheld one foreigner he would have felt happy never to see again.

"Why, here's that Katzen fellow," he said, turning to his companion. "I thought we were rid of him for a week or two, at any rate."

"What can have brought him back?" marvelled Frank Scott.

"No good, you may be sure."

"He told me on Saturday morning he was going to Paris."

"I wish he would go there and stay there."

“Hush!—he will hear you,” expostulated Frank, for Mr. Jeffley in an access of energy had raised his voice somewhat unduly.

“I don’t care whether he does or not!” said Jack, lowering his tone, however.





CHAPTER II.

MR. KATZEN'S NEWS.

“**H**ERE I am, you see, like a bad sixpence!” exclaimed Mr. Katzen gaily, at the same time extending his hand, which Mr. Jeffley felt forced to take, and shake with a heartiness he was far from feeling.

“We thought you were on the other side of the water,” he observed, merely because no other remark occurred to him.

“I did not even start,” said Mr. Katzen; “I got a piece of unexpected news after I left you on Saturday, which changed all my plans.”

“Good news, I hope?” suggested Mr. Jeffley.

“Well, you shall judge of that presently,”

answered the foreigner ; “ let us go into your room for a minute and summon your wife ; you stay too, Scott—I cannot have one friend absent while I tell what I have to tell.”

“ He is going to be married, Frank,” said Mr. Jeffley, who had already, with stentorian lungs, shouted for “ Maria !” “ Wife !” “ Mrs. Jeffley !” till a shrill “ What’s wanted with Mrs. Jeffley now ? Oh ! be quiet, do. I’m coming,” assured him his better half was on her way from the upper regions.

“ No ; I am not going to be married, that I know of, just yet,” said Mr. Katzen, in reply to the remark about matrimony. “ I may be, though, for——”

At that juncture the end of Mr. Katzen’s sentence was cut short for ever by a series of wifely expostulations emanating from Mrs. Jeffley as she came along the passage.

“ John, I wonder at you, screaming the house down, and Captain Hassell gone to bed and all. What do you want ?” she finished, entering Jack’s room, which was almost in total darkness, owing to the narrowness of the court called Fowkes’ Buildings and the gathering twilight.

“What do I want?” repeated her husband, who was accustomed to such forms of conjugal endearment. “Bless you, I want nothing—but here’s Mr. Katzen home, brimful of good news, and he won’t tell Frank and me what it is till you are quite at leisure to listen too.”

“Mr. Katzen!” exclaimed Mrs. Jeffley, in astonishment, “I did not see you. Frank, light the gas.”

“Yes, Frank, light the gas,” capped Mr. Jeffley, with a solemn gravity which on any stage must have brought down the house. “Here are matches, my boy.”

“I never thought of seeing you,” exclaimed Mrs. Jeffley, addressing Mr. Katzen, her face literally beaming with smiles.

“No more did I,” supplemented Jack, in a tone which really meant, “No such luck;” but neither his wife nor Mr. Katzen noticed it.

“You told me you would be away for a fortnight at least,” went on the lady.

“Yes; but I did not then know what was going to happen.”

“Why, what has happened?” asked Mrs.

Jeffley. "I can tell from your manner it is nothing very unpleasant."

"It is nothing unpleasant—quite the other thing. It is just this: I am appointed Consul for New Andalusia;" and Mr. Katzen, who had delivered his astounding intelligence in a voice he could scarcely steady, so great was his exultation, paused for the clapping and huzzaing he felt should follow.

Instead there ensued a dead silence, which was broken at length by Mr. Jeffley asking:

"Where the dickens is New Andalusia?"

"In South America," answered the new Consul, a little sulkily.

"Then you will be leaving us!" cried Mrs. Jeffley, forgetting to congratulate her friend in the despair caused by the idea he would have to cross the sea and remain across it.

"Leaving you—for what reason?" returned Mr. Katzen, who, wrapped up in his own fresh importance, had failed to follow the lady's line of thought.

"Because you will of course have to go and live in that country with the strange name."

"Live there!—not so. Oh no!—I am

Consul for New Andalusia in England, not Consul for England in New Andalusia."

"Make yourself quite easy, wife," interposed Mr. Jeffley; "we are not going to lose Mr. Katzen yet awhile."

"That is a very kind way of putting the matter," said Mr. Katzen. "A Frenchman could not have phrased the matter more happily; and what enhances the value of the compliment is, that you are always what a Frenchman sometimes is not—utterly sincere."

He could not have refrained from the sneer, no matter what had come of it; but nothing at all came of it, save that Jack Jeffley turned very red, and shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other, muttered some word about his being "sincere enough, if that was all."

"And so far," said Frank Scott—who, if he were young and poor, and unconsidered by the lodgers Mrs. Jeffley looked after and believed in, had yet a ready wit and a pleasant manner of his own—"not one of us has expressed the smallest satisfaction concerning

Mr. Katzen's good fortune. Shall I speak first, Mr. Jeffley, or will you?"

"I am always glad to hear about anybody doing well," answered Jack, a little awkwardly. "Mr. Katzen knows that; and I hope with all my heart this appointment may land him in clover one day."

"And so do I," cried Mrs. Jeffley. "Mr. Katzen, you may be sure, with all my heart, I wish you prosperity. It ought not to need words to tell you that."

"No," answered Mr. Katzen, taking the lady's outstretched hand in both of his; "actions speak louder than words, and your actions have spoken loudly to me for many a year."

"I scarcely count, I suppose," added Frank Scott; "but I cannot help saying I am rejoiced to hear of your good fortune."

"For it is really good fortune, I suppose," suggested Mrs. Jeffley; "it must be, or you would not look so pleased."

"It is such good fortune," replied Mr. Katzen, "that if Mrs. Childs could manage anywhere to get us a couple of bottles of

decent champagne, I should like to see glasses filled in its honour ;” and as the new Consul spoke, he put his hand in his pocket and drew forth a quantity of coin, amongst which sovereigns were as plentiful as shillings.

“ Bless and save us !” thought Jack Jeffley ; “ do they pay them in advance ?” But he only said aloud, “ There is no need to send Mrs. Childs on any such wild-goose chase—we have best part of a dozen still left of that Catawba young Morson brought me from America ; and though you may not think much of it, you’ll find it a far better wine than anything Mrs. Childs is likely to get from a tavern on a Whit Monday night. And look here, Mr. Katzen—I know my wife has a bit of supper ready ; take share of it with us. I need not tell you, when Mrs. Jeffley is the provider, there will be plenty and to spare.”

“ There is nothing but cold beef,” said Mrs. Jeffley sadly.

“ Well, what can be better than cold beef ?” asked Mr. Jeffley.

“ Especially with a good salad ! Let me mix the salad,” entreated Mr. Katzen.

"Certainly, if you leave my name out of it," said Mr. Jeffley.

"True, I forgot you like to eat your lettuce raw," said Mr. Katzen.

"And so I do," remarked Frank Scott; "and Mrs. Jeffley objects to oil, and cares only for vinegar."

"Oh, you English, how funny you are!"

"We are not the only funny people in the world, that is one comfort," retorted Mr. Jeffley.

"We have not even the monopoly of queerness!" added Frank Scott, who was always ready with some word likely to avert a quarrel.

"Though you *are* very queer," returned Mr. Katzen. "By-the-bye, I have not yet thanked you for your invitation, Mr. Jeffley, which I shall do myself the honour of accepting. I go to brush a little of the day's dust from my person, and then I return. *Au revoir.*"

"You never said anything truer than that," observed Mr. Jeffley, as the door closed behind his wife and her lodger. "*Au revoir*, indeed—faith, it is always

revoir !” and Jack’s face assumed an expression he meant to be sarcastic, but which was only comical. “Read me this riddle, Frank : what is there about our little friend to inspire devotion ? Under the pretence of telling Jane to lay a cover for him, my wife has gone to put on her best bib and tucker in his honour, and if I am not much mistaken she will take half-a-dozen of those new-laid eggs to make him an omelette. Then, as though all that were not enough, some one goes and gets him an appointment as Consul—and we are all forced in consequence to tell untruths and say we feel glad——”

“So I do—and so ought you,” answered young Scott.

“And why, pray ?”

“Because, now he is getting up in the world, he will very probably leave Fowkes’ Buildings.”

“Leave Fowkes’ Buildings ! He knows a trick worth two of that.”

“I am not so sure—besides, he may marry. If that handful of gold means anything, it means the ability to get money.”

"I believe it to be all a flash in the pan."

"You will find yourself mistaken, I hope," answered Frank; "and you know, Mr. Jeffley, you *are* glad the man has got a good berth—you couldn't wish ill to your worst enemy."

"I should not like to see him brought home on a stretcher, with a broken neck—if that is what you mean—but I can't take to the fellow. Hang it! I really did mean to be civil to him; but I am sorry now I asked him for supper. Those good eggs wasted in an omelette stick in my throat."

"Don't meet trouble half-way," advised the young man. "Anyhow, console yourself with the assurance that they won't stick in his."

Mr. Jeffley burst into a hearty peal of laughter. "That they won't, I warrant," he said. "I only wish they would—no I don't. It would vex me if ill came to him in my house, and perhaps, after all, he is not so bad as I think him."

Mr. Francis Scott wisely refrained from speech. Mr. Katzen must have been very bad indeed had he outstripped the measure

of iniquity that gentleman considered him capable of compassing.

“He is as bad a lot as ever drew breath,” he thought; “and though honest Jack has no need to be jealous, it will be a blessed day when he takes his departure. Consul! I wonder what sort of people the New Andalusians can be when they choose him for representative. But he’ll not stay long in Fowkes’ Buildings. That, to quote Mr. Jeffley, is as sure as God made little apples.”

Considering the diversity of temperaments gathered around the supper-table the meal did not go off so badly. Mr. Jeffley beheld Mr. Katzen turn back his cuffs, smell the oil, hold the vinegar up to the light, put in a spoonful of this, and add a pinch of that, without audible remark. He was good-natured about the eggs, and he pressed the butter on the foreigner’s notice; he refrained from speech, though he considered that Mr. Katzen’s nose assumed a disdainful expression as it inhaled the bouquet of the Catawba; while on his side the new Consul preserved an eloquent silence when Jack, after draining off about a pint of ale, declared

honest malt liquor like that was worth the whole of the sparkling wine in bond.

They were all in the happiest mood; Jack thinking pleasantly about that matrimonial suggestion hazarded by Scott, "a young fellow who has far more in him than anybody might imagine," as he often declared; Mr. Katzen full of delightful plans for the future; Mrs. Jeffley eagerly curious.

"You will now take that beautiful ground-floor office you have been hankering after so long, I suppose," she hazarded, in one of the pauses of the repast.

"Only wish I could," answered Mr. Katzen; "but old Brisco let it last September. I know he is ready to cry with vexation, for he can neither get rent from his tenant, who is a bad man, nor induce him to go. He wanted me to wait, but I said: 'No, my friend; while I had little money I was forced to wait. I will never wait again, if I can help it.'"

"Just like you!" remarked Mrs. Jeffley admiringly.

"No—no," went on Mr. Katzen, who, if

he had found the Catawba wanting in many things he considered desirable, could not at least accuse the wine of lacking strength. "I wait no more. I have had my turn—let the others now take their turn. I have already got an office better situated than Botolph Lane, where I can do good for you," and he nodded to Frank Scott.

"Thank you, Mr. Katzen," answered that youth; "it is very kind of you to think of me."

"I think of all my friends," said Mr. Katzen solemnly. "I am not, as some, forgetful in prosperity. The office I have got is in Mitre Court—as calm, as quiet as the old house. I should have preferred the old house, though—my luck in it was always well; but it may be I shall have more and better luck in Mitre Court."

"Where is Mitre Court?" asked Mrs. Jeffley, just as her husband had asked the latitude and longitude of New Andalusia.

"Off Milk Street, dear friend; but I shall drop the Milk and substitute Wood Street. It is all as one."

"And what is your work?" inquired Jack Jeffley, beautifully practical.

Mr. Katzen, who at the moment was peeling an American apple, suspended his occupation, and accurately balancing the fruit-knife on the first finger of his left hand, replied :

“To do the very best I can for myself.”

“A rather vague answer,” said Mr. Jeffley.

“I can’t give you a better yet,” answered Mr. Katzen. “Remember, I am only now in my new capacity—three days old. Give me a little more time, and I shall be able to tell you all. If I serve my adopted country well, I must, I should hope, serve myself well also. Take it for all in all, there is no such land on earth. Blessed in its climate, its government, its population, its minerals, its forests, its situation, its harbours, its capacities for producing grain and raising cattle, there is nothing under heaven New Andalusia needs except to be brought into closer connection with Great Britain; and,” finished Mr. Katzen, “I feel I am destined to bring about her espousals.”

“Bravo!” exclaimed Mr. Jeffley. “All I hope is, the marriage may not prove dis-

astrous to Great Britain. We have taken to ourselves a lot of wives, and one way or another they have managed to give us a heap of bother."

"This wife shan't," said Mr. Katzen. "No, not more than your dear best half, looking radiantly beautiful, seated opposite to yourself."

The illustration was so exquisitely unhappy, that Frank Scott felt compelled to put his hand to his mouth in order to conceal a smile.

"My best half doesn't look amiss," said Mr. Jeffley, wisely ignoring the first part of the foreigner's remark, and looking across the table with a proud and loving glance, in which there was mingled a dash of sadness unutterably pathetic; "but we won't praise her to her face for fear—as she tells the young ones sometimes—of making her vain."

"If hearing the truth could have spoiled Mrs. Jeffley, she must have lost her sweet simplicity long ago."

"Mrs. Jeffley is not simple," interposed that lady, with a laugh, "and she does not

want any more compliments ; she knows all they are worth. Seriously, I am so sorry you cannot get those two beautiful offices ; I wanted some day to see the old painted panels, and the fine chimney-pieces."

"I should have liked well, too, to see you puzzling your wise head over the Indians, and the animals, and the tropical trees. The series of paintings constitutes, I suppose, a whole story ; but what that story may be no one can tell now. There are two funny fellows riding on a rhinoceros, and there are others gathering tobacco-leaves, and there are chariots drawn by some sort of deer, and something like a church, and white people, and sea and mountains. Ah, good Lord ! and am not I sorry ! it has just occurred to me that I could have said the tale the panels told me was the colonization and civilization and Christianizing of New Andalusia. More, as I stated before, I have always had good luck in that old house ; whenever I have left it to better myself, worse has followed. Well, I must try to get back there after a while. The old man believes in me. For all he is——"

“Why do you not finish your sentence, Mr. Katzen?” asked Jack maliciously.

“*Himmel!* because it cuts against myself,” answered Mr. Katzen, with appalling frankness. “I was going to say, for all he is so keen, so astute, so far-seeing, he has a faith in my power I have often lacked myself. To be sure, I have always paid him his rent, but that was mostly, perhaps, because he chanced to be too poor to do without it.”

“Why, I should have thought a man who owned such a house must be well-to-do,” said Mrs. Jeffley, for whom the mystery associated with her lodger’s landlord had always possessed the fascination something unexplained of necessity holds for common-place minds.

“He doesn’t own the house—he rents it,” explained Mr. Katzen for at least the fiftieth time; “and then he has to pay rates and taxes, and get his money back as he can. What with one loss and another, and no business to speak of, and the wretched way he keeps the house, he must be as poor as our ancient friend Job, or our more modern acquaintance the church-mouse. Unless, in-

deed——” added Mr. Katzen, struck by a sudden thought.

Frank Scott lifted his head as the foreigner paused, and said, as if amused :

“You are leaving all your sentences unfinished, Mr. Katzen, to-night. Unless what ?”

“‘ Unless ’ was only a sudden idea which occurred to me,” replied Mr. Katzen. “I thought it meant something, but really it amounts to nothing at all. No man on earth would make such a believe about poverty as to eat as Brisco eats, lodge as Brisco lodges, live as Brisco lives, and dress as Brisco dresses.”

“How does the man live, then ?” asked Mr. Jeffley.

“Like a pauper,” was the answer. “He goes to bed as soon as the offices are closed, to save light and fuel ; to my knowledge he has worn the same old coat for the last six years ; he never spends a farthing on ’bus fare ; he manages somehow to exist on a diet which would starve a dog—dry bread, and milk and water, for breakfast ; an apple, and bread again, for dinner. He once bought a

pennyworth of herrings when they were six a penny, and I know he had not finished them at the end of a fortnight. It is miserable to see him."

"Dear me!" cried kindly Mrs. Jeffley; "and to think of all the things we have left over here—things Mrs. Childs and her niece can't get through. There is a quart of beautiful soup, all of a jelly, in the house now."

"I shouldn't advise you to send it to Mr. Brisco, that's all," said Mr. Katzen. "I never shall forget the way he snapped off my nose one day when I proposed he should come out and have some dinner with me, I to pay the piper. I remarked, innocently enough, I thought he must be tired of stale bread and fruit, and that I should really enjoy seeing him eat a cut off a good joint for once. In a moment he had fanned himself into a white heat of passion. He was in such a rage, even his lips grew white. He is colourless and bloodless enough at the best; but he got absolutely livid, and he drew himself up—up till I found myself looking at him with my chin lifted, and my head thrown back. 'Sir,' he

said, ' if you choose to swill ale all day, it is no affair of mine ; if I prefer to live like a Christian, it is no affair of yours.' No, no ! dear generous madame ; take my advice, and send no cups of broth, or pieces of cake, or scraps of pudding, to my friend in Botolph Lane. If you do, you will most likely see them walk back again to your front door with a message you won't relish."

" Faith, I think the old fellow is right, though," interposed Mr. Jeffley. " A man may be poor, but he needn't be a beggar."

" I don't consider a man ought to count himself anything of the kind, if he lets a friend stand him a dinner," retorted Mr. Katzen.

" Yes, if he can't return the civility," persisted Jack manfully.

" What do you say, Scott ? Judge between us," said the new Consul.

" You should not refer to me," answered the young fellow, flushing a little. " I am under far too many obligations here to be able to speak impartially."

" Tut, tut !" cried Mr. Jeffley, stretching out a stalwart arm, and touching Frank on

the shoulder. "You are under no obligation, none at all. Quite the other way."

"I am sure," added Mrs. Jeffley, "you have never had anything in this house but what you paid for most honourably."

"There are things which cannot be paid for," murmured Frank Scott, with a tremor in his voice, and a look in his downcast face which filled Mrs. Jeffley with a feeling as like self-reproach as that estimable lady was capable of experiencing.

For a moment she was rent by a spasm of compunction. During the cold weather she had dealt out blankets sparingly, she had stripped his room whenever anybody else required pillows, or crockery, or looking-glass, or strips of carpet. She had stinted him in towels and chairs, and given him yellow soap, and docked the lad of fifty small luxuries which would have cost her little and been much to him, and yet he never complained, but seemed grateful.

But no, she thought, he was grateful only to Jack, only to her as being Jack's wife; and the foolish woman, who could not understand the patience and affection of both husband

and lodger, the male tolerance of female shortcomings, the male thankfulness for such kindness and attention as modern civilization permits the "weaker vessel" to evince, hardened her heart once more against Frank Scott, whom she had long previously decided to be as poor a creature as Jack Jeffley.

Prosperity is too strong a tonic for some natures. Prosperity had been a very bad medicine indeed for Mrs. Jeffley.

"And does that girl," she asked hastily, reverting to the original question, "also live on dry bread, apples, and herrings?"

"I should say not," answered Mr. Katzen, lifting a pair of sleepy eyes. "Judging from her appearance she lives on the fat of the land. She is getting extremely pretty—growing in grace with God and man. If she were well dressed she would astonish the natives hereabouts. What a figure she has! What a little spitfire she is!"

"Mrs. Childs always said she was a nasty sly cat," commented Mrs. Jeffley.

"Upon the whole I think Mrs. Childs was wrong. She may be a cat, but she is not nasty—quite the contrary. She is what you

English are so fond of calling ‘nice.’ She is well-favoured, well-shaped, good to look upon, good to talk to, even when she flares up and lets that big temper of hers blaze out.”

“Blaze out! To whom?”

“Well, to me, for example,” said Mr. Katzen, laughing, as if the whole matter were a most excellent joke. “I have known her so long, I have known her so utterly, anybody might have thought she could not fail to understand Karl Katzen. Yet to-day, if you believe me, she figuratively buried every claw she owns in this poor flesh of mine.”

“What had you done to her?” asked Mr. Jeffley.

“Done!—I done!—upon my sacred oath, nothing. All I said was, ‘Look here, Abby: a great stroke of luck has come to me; get yourself a new dress on the strength of it,’ and I laid down a sovereign.”

“Yes?” said Mrs. Jeffley interrogatively.

“She took the money up and threw it across the table at me. If it had hit the mark, I should have come back to you with a black eye, but being in a rage she aimed wide. My God! I should like to marry that

girl and tame her!" and Mr. Katzen laughed softly once again.

"Why, you would be far, far too old for her!" declared Mrs. Jeffley, dealing the cruellest blow she could.

Even while he winced Mr. Katzen answered :

"She is old enough in all but years, and of that small failing she must mend rapidly."

"Yes, she will be twenty before she can look about her," said Mrs. Jeffley irritably, while Jack and his friend maintained an amazed silence.

"That is true," agreed Mr. Katzen ; "three years at her time of life pass like the shadow of a dream. When twenty is passed we begin to feel the grinding of the wheels, which, as that good Solomon says, drag the nearer we approach our inevitable end."

"I don't believe Solomon says anything of the sort," answered Mrs. Jeffley ; and it was noticeable after this she devoted many of her words and a considerable amount of her attention to Frank Scott.

Often that evening, ere he sought repose in that chamber well supplied with blankets,

pillows, and "all other appurtenances to boot," Mr. Katzen, watching Mrs. Jeffley's manœuvres, and hearing what Mrs. Jeffley said, smiled a secret sort of smile to himself, which meant that he understood and appreciated the position perfectly.

It is really most curious to consider how exhaustively foreigners comprehend the weakness of all human beings except themselves!





CHAPTER III.

A PLAINT.

DESTROYING angels nowadays assume the form either of a speculative builder or a clamorous shareholder.

At this present time of writing, the latter is working his wickedest will in the heart of the City. By virtue of an Act of Parliament passed entirely in his interest, though ostensibly for the benefit of a long-suffering public, he is removing old landmarks, sweeping away streets, burrowing through the earth like a mole. Ere many months elapse, he will, through neat iron gratings, be vomiting up steam and smoke into the busiest thoroughfares; while next year may find him quietly slipping another Bill through Committee, em-

powering his company to utilize St. Paul's for a terminus.

If Stephenson could revisit this world, how pleased he would be to see the full extent of the destruction already wrought by his invention! Never before in the history of mankind was such a transformation effected! And yet, with all its railways, there probably could be found no city harder to get into or out of, than London, which, once quaint, picturesque, and interesting, is fast becoming a mere junction, diversified with huge blocks of ugly buildings that will all most likely have to come down ere long, to make way for the transit and housing of rolling-stock.

In the country, the speculative builder is changing the face of Nature; in the City, his twin-brother is wrecking the works of Man. To them nothing is sacred; the living and the dead they are alike prepared to sacrifice. The altars of ancient Moloch were at least reared amongst groves. His high places were shadowed by swaying branches and dancing leaves, but our modern Molochs cut down and spare not every green thing they see, and foul every fair stream they come

across ; they erect shoddy villas, and run up stucco terraces, and plan brick-and-mortar wildernesses, which they facetiously call "Gardens." Their course may be tracked by reason of heaps of rubbish and burning clay and volumes of smoke, long trails of cinders and dust and desolation, and starved flower-beds and yellow gravel and woe !

As "new and powerful" engines pant their dreary way from Queen Victoria Street to the Tower, they will pass an interesting corner of Old London, which, though no doubt doomed in the near future, has as yet escaped demolition. A hard fight was made over the Church of St. Mary-at-Hill. No doubt there was some knight-errant connected with the parish, who failed to see why even a nineteenth-century dragon should have everything his own way. It seems strange that in an age which complacently permitted Crosby Hall to be turned into a restaurant ; allowed such monstrosities as the galvanized sheds at Cannon Street and Charing Cross to live ; set up a ridiculous griffin, brandishing a tea-tray at Temple Bar ; and holds its peace while railway bridge after railway bridge is thrown

across the river ; which is satisfied to see the finest site in Europe spoiled by the erection of tasteless buildings, without form and void of colour ; which thought no shame to allow tall stacks of offices to hide the beautiful tower of St. Mary Aldermary, and never winced when three old churches vanished in the twinkling of an eye—anyone could be found strong enough and bold enough to protect an edifice so little known and so out-of-the-way as St. Mary-at-Hill. It is, however, not more strange than true. No glamour of romance hangs round the church, though of ancient date, Richard Hackney having presented to the living so long ago as 1337. No part of the original building remains except three walls ; the very windows were changed from Gothic by some Vandal towards the end of the last century ; the interior fittings date no further back than 1672. There are not any monuments of peculiar interest, a goodly collection of worthy citizens have mouldered away to dust within its walls ; but the place, unlike its near neighbours, All Hallows, Barking, and St. Olave, Hart Street, has no name famous in history associated with it ;

neither can it boast, as may St. Dunstan-in-the-East, situated within a stone's-throw, of having been served by eminent preachers. Nevertheless, the whole parish is interesting, both by reason of its surroundings and the field its quiet annals open for imagination to rove through. We do not know who lived in the ancient red brick houses we meet with in the small courts and passages just out of Love Lane, but from the windows, flush with the walls, faces of the past look forth to greet our own. Through doorways, adorned with canopy and architrave, we can see the men and women of former times on the first Sunday after Midsummer-day pace slowly to St. Mary's, to hear the annual sermon preached before the Fellowship Porters.

"This antient custom" has now fallen into desuetude, but fancy, cleaving the mists of years, can give us back that annual procession of Fellowship Porters, each man carrying a "large nosegay" from hall to church. And to those who know St. Mary's—"well wainscotted," with "oak pews," "enriched with cherubim, festoons," an "altar-piece of Norway oak, with a handsome cornice and

pediment," an "interior over the middle aisle graced with a very light and beautiful cupola"—it is perfectly easy to picture that solemn march to the altar, where "every porter deposits his benevolence, for the use of the poor and to defray the expenses of the day, into two basins provided for the purpose. After having performed this ceremony, the deputy, merchants, with their wives, children, and servants," once walked in order "from their separate pews to perform the same solemnity."

The scent of those old-world flowers fills the church. Amid the Bibles and Prayer-books on the ledge, in front of every man, woman, and child, lies a nosegay, presented overnight to the "merchants and respectable families in the neighbourhood" by the members of the Company. The air is sweet with stocks and lavender and cabbage roses, and all those fair vanished flowers that once went to make a perfect bouquet. It was a fanciful and charming custom which need not have been forgotten, even in these days of hard utility. The Lion Sermon is still preached, and the flower service held in St.

Katharine Cree. Annually pennies are tossed on an old tombstone in St. Bartholomew's graveyard. Bancroft's sermon has not yet been discontinued, though it is said on the occasion his body is now not taken out of the coffin—perhaps because there is no body left to take—in order to be exhibited to the almsmen of his charity. All these and many other customs still flourish in their pristine freshness, but the pleasant spectacle of hundreds of Fellowship Porters walking to church and carrying “great nosegays” is never beheld. It is dead as the bright buds made up hundreds of years ago into posies, which lived their little hour, and drooped and faded—dead as the children who once played about St. Mary's Hill—dead as the men and women who bore their cares and sorrows as well as their fragrant flowers into God's very house.

Well, perchance 'tis best so! In a world where nothing abides for ever, save that Divine message which to-day floats clear and sweet over the busy haunts of toiling men, as it did nigh upon two thousand years ago across the star-lit plains of Palestine, we need

scarcely regret that the sweet custom died while there was yet some of the old City left to mourn its departure.

A much less poetical observance, however, might be with the greatest advantage revived. In the year 1701, during the reign of William III., an order was made by the Court of rulers, auditors, and assistants of the Company of Watermen and Lightermen of the river Thames, observing “that several watermen and their apprentices, while they are rowing upon that river or at their plying-places between Gravesend and Windsor, *often use immodest, obscene, and lewd expressions towards passengers and to each other, that are offensive to all sober persons, and tend to the corruption of youths;*” it was therefore ordained, “That watermen or lightermen convicted of using such expressions forfeit 2s. 6d. for every such offence; and if any waterman or lighterman’s apprentice shall offend in the same manner, his master or mistress shall on his conviction forfeit the same sum, or in case of their refusal, the offender shall suffer such correction as the rulers of the Company shall think fit and

necessary. The forfeitures when paid to be applied to the use of the poor, aged, decayed, and maimed members of the Company, their widows and children."

If half-a-crown were now exacted for every offensive word uttered on the silent highway, and the towing-paths, not merely might the destitute of Billingsgate be supported, but the whole of the poor of London! On a Sunday morning in summer, for example, what a sweet crop could be garnered, from Gravesend to Windsor! The imagination reels when it considers the amount of bad language which in the course of one day alone is thrown on the Thames and absolutely wasted, not a solitary sixpence being in these days harvested out of it!

Side by side on the spot we have been considering three lanes run almost parallel to each other from Lower Thames Street up the hill leading to Eastcheap and Little Tower Street—to wit, St. Mary-at-Hill, Love Lane, and Botolph Lane. They lie close together, a little paved alley, called Church Passage, connecting St. Mary-at-Hill with Love Lane; Botolph Alley leading from the

latter into Botolph Lane, where stands the Church of St. George, with which is united the Parish of St. Botolph, Billingsgate.

In a courtyard that might well escape the observation of passers-by, entered as it is through an archway of the most unassuming appearance, there stands even to this day an old and most beautiful house.

It is placed with its back to Love Lane, while the front looks out on a square paved with cobbles, and surrounded by buildings presumably much more modern than the mansion once inhabited by no less a person than Sir Christopher Wren.

To pass out of the City streets, where staring new warehouses are fast elbowing the more ancient buildings off the face of the earth, into that spacious hall paved with black and white marble, is like stepping back a couple of centuries in England's history. There are no such halls nowadays. Where could such another staircase be found? See the massive balustrades, the carved balusters; notice the easy ascent of the oak steps, which lead by three short flights to the first-floor. There is a dignity about the mansion

nineteenth-century architects toil after in vain. The hall occupies the whole depth of the house; it is over thirty feet long and nearly twenty wide. A double sweep of stone steps leads up to the front door, and we can stand on the wide level flagging at the top, and, looking over the iron rails, gaze round the quiet courtyard and take a peep down at the dog-kennel formed by leaving an opening under the steps, and the "dog-lick" hollowed out of the solid stone pavement that runs below. Who owned the last dog who kept guard there? and of what breed were the animals that slaked their thirst from that cool basin, while St. Paul's was rising from its ruins, and Wren weeping tears, which did not disgrace his manhood, over the cruel and selfish thwarting of that magnificent ideal which, if carried out, would have rendered London's Cathedral a truly grand and fitting monument for its architect? Wren has gone where we may fain hope there is a "Resurgam"* for ideas still-born

* "In the beginning of the new works of St. Paul's," writes Sir Christopher Wren in the "Parentalia," "we are told an incident was taken notice of by some people as a memorable omen. When the surveyor in person had set

on earth, and plans it was impossible for him to perfect here. The dogs that once bayed the moon, touching with her silver splendour the trees in St. Botolph's silent graveyard, have for two hundred years been unconscious of the curses or caresses bestowed upon them by the lackeys and varlets, fit predecessors of our modern grooms and butlers. The houses of a great overgrown, dusty, bustling city are jostling each other, even as the men and women are crowding and crushing the stronger upon the weaker, in the streets which once were quiet and quaint, rich in ancient architecture, streaked with those tones of colour it needs the passage of centuries to

out upon the plan the dimensions of the great dome, and fixed upon the centre, a common labourer was ordered to bring a flat stone from the mass of rubbish (such as should first come to hand) to be laid for a mark and direction to the masons ; the stone, which was immediately brought and laid down for that purpose, happened to be a piece of a gravestone with nothing remaining of the inscription but this single word in large capitals, 'Resurgam.' How much the architect himself was struck by the circumstance we see by the decorations of the pediment over the northern portico, where an exquisitely sculptured Phoenix rising from the flames, with the motto 'Resurgam,' has been placed in accordance with the idea suggested by the incident."—Knight's "London."

paint to perfection ; and yet—and yet this wonderful old mansion for a while stands apart and quiet, as a gentlewoman of the olden time, with soft white hair and placid face and winning manner, may still now and then, at the rarest of intervals, be encountered walking solitary to that earthly dwelling from whence at some not remote time her remains shall be carried more reverently, let us hope, than the “building materials” of the old Botolph Lane dwelling which will be under the hammer before we can look about us.

Why does not the City buy such houses and preserve them intact ? Why should we, even as we look upon this vestige of a once picturesque and interesting London, be compelled to forecast that not remote time when its walls will groan under the shame of staring bills announcing its “materials” are on a certain day to pass under the hammer ? Then, as in a terrible nightmare, we see it “lotted off”—its chimney-pieces, its wainscots, its panels, the noble doorway, the leaden roof, from which, it may be, Sir Christopher himself beheld London’s “tall bully” rising to the skies, and turned to view the lantern

church spire, which tradition says was designed by his daughter.

It is a pretty fancy, so do not let us inquire too closely into its truth. There, at all events, are the leads whence it is easy nowadays to see the Crystal Palace, or, easier still, to break one's neck, if such a course seem more agreeable.

Off those leads a stone might be pitched into the tower either of St. George or St. Mary. From Love Lane an ancient and fish-like smell arises like a mist; it is so dense, it almost overpowers the various odours of fruit that abound in the neighbourhood. Pineapples, oranges, lemons, bananas, forbidden fruit—they are all there struggling for mastery with the fish; but the fish elbows them out of court. Now and then a whiff of lemon or a gust of pineapple cleaves right across the courtyard; but the dominant scent is of herrings, fresh and stale; of plaice that has been sold and eaten, but the scent of which still lingers around; of mackerel and whiting, and all other fish that swim within easy range of London. They are here merged into one great whole—into one vast,

solid, indescribable smell the inhabitants say they never notice—nay, that they assert does not exist.

“How should it?” they ask. “The streets are cleaned twice a day, and the gutters flushed with carbolic acid.” (Satan casting out Beelzebub.)

If they like the atmosphere, and triumphantly quote the Registrar-General’s returns, why should anyone else grumble? No! though there are courts and alleys the stranger ought to “back” along, the first whiff to unaccustomed nostrils proving well-nigh unendurable if met face to face.

Queer facts as well as smells meet one in these lanes. Take this for example. Did you, reader, ever hear of innocent brazils heating like a haystack? They do, though; they have sprung the flooring of the old house, as you can see if you will descend from the roof and enter a small room on the ground-floor, now used for hanging up boys’ caps, once in the occupation of G. Brisco, the “colourless and bloodless” man, who spent many a dreary and weary and lonely year in the old house which

must once have been so fair and goodly a dwelling.

By the steam given off from those and other nuts, the boards have been prized from their nails, and lifted from an inch to half an inch. Strange, is it not? and yet, perhaps, no stranger than that the panels painted by one Robinson (whoever he might be), in the year of grace 1670, as all who choose to go and see can read, are strained and cracked by a similar action on the part of oranges. Methinks were I, the writer of this book, and in my modest holding of a human being one of the humblest of created mortals, in any capacity free of the City of London—say liveryman, common councillor, deputy-sheriff, sheriff, alderman, Lord Mayor—I would make the City—which after all cannot be accounted so very big, though undoubtedly it is very great—my study: I would know every court, lane, alley, house, exhaustively; and were there still left an old mansion, hallowed by fact or tradition, I should try to save it; and if I could not, I would enter my protest—uselessly, it might be, yet with no uncertain sound—against the Philistine utilitarianism

of an age which, desecrating the word "progress," sweeps away, for the sake of accursed Mammon, every ancient landmark, and will lay us open an hundred years hence to the gibes of a posterity who—Heaven grant!—may have better taste than to turn such a residence, as has been tried in this chapter to portray, *into a school for children of the parish.*

It seems incredible, but it is simply the truth.

Billingsgate youth at this present moment is wiping its feet at the back entrance of Sir Christopher Wren's old house, making its riotous way up his servants' staircase—in his withdrawing-room, the walls of which are adorned with imbecile pictures, putting up its hands ere answering some most foolish question. Lord, grant me patience while I write!

O City! once interesting beyond all power of speech—now a mere aggregation of offices and warehouses, swollen with wealth, insolent with prosperity—hearken to my plaint!

With an exceeding love have I, an alien,

loved you. In your better time I knew you, and there was scarce a stone in your pavement, or house in your streets, but had a fascination for one who deliberately elected to strive and interweave the touching romance of daily life and eternal struggle with the dry details of commerce. Your sooty trees were more to me than forest or upland; the wave of humanity, rushing eternally over your stony-hearted pavements, seemed a grander, mightier sight than Atlantic billows racing like war-horses upon an iron-bound coast. Scarce a man or woman in your midst but whose face held to my fancy a story and a pathos no one, perhaps, would have felt more astounded to see put into print than its owner; with toil and travail I learned the ins and outs of your commerce; of the best God vouchsafed to me, I gave you all; and for myself the result has been well-nigh *nil*. I piped to you and ye did not dance, I mourned and ye did not weep; yet this I could have borne, for in authorship, as in all art, there is a reward the world wots not of.

What I cannot bear, however, is your

changed and desecrated face. As the years count, I have not been for so long a time one of your strange and unwelcome children, yet you are no more the London of my dream and of my memory than some shameless woman, flaunting her guilty face in the gaslight, is to the girl who stood, with the apple-blossoms falling on her young head, while listening to the whispering of a lover who meant her no wrong.

To look at you now is worse than looking on a grave, because we believe that somewhere—*somewhere*—the one we loved is living still in all great and noble qualities unchanged; but you—what have you given in lieu of your picturesque and gracious past, in which Pepys penned his diary, and his great contemporary, whose “soul was like a star and dwelt apart,” who “had a voice, whose sound was like the sea,” wrote those stately sentences which more resemble the full swell of some noble organ than ordinary prose?

I say nothing of kings, queens, martyrs, patriots, who have passed through your streets. It is enough to think of the men

who lived in them, and for whose memory you have not even the decent respect a son might entertain for some common-place mother.

Out upon you! Anathema maranatha! Was it not enough that you let a railway bridge be flung across Ludgate Hill; that you are sitting calmly with folded hands while the Thames is being spanned by iron girders; that you are permitting the finest thoroughfare in the world to be disfigured by buildings destitute of beauty; that under the name railway termini you allow galvanized sheds to remain, which are a horror to behold; that you let chance after chance slip away of acquiring river frontages on the Surrey side, where all the Government offices could be splendidly placed, and constitute such an architectural effect as might gladden the soul of Sir Christopher himself; but you must sweep away, in your greed for gain and ground-rents, every landmark of the better time in your history, when another god than Mammon was worshipped? What have I not seen swept away as of no account? Even in my own poor work

scarce one stone is left upon another to tell where the people who glided out of shadow-land to walk and talk with me—who became parts of my being, who were bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh, more real to me than ninety-nine out of a hundred of the thousands of human beings I have actually known—lived, and played out their little tragedies.

Almost before his story was told, the house in which Hugh Elyot died fell under the hammer. On its site there is now a rookery of small weekly tenements. If George Geith strayed to-morrow into "Fen Court" he would not recognise the changed face of the once retired nook where he and Beryl were so happy. Over the graveyard Yorke Forde must have looked upon so often, the trains have for many a year run in and out of Cannon Street Station, whilst even the railing over which she leaned while telling her shame to Luke Ross is altered. Ere "The Senior Partner" had reached its final number, that North Street where Alfred Mostyn fried his rashers, and wound up his clock, was improved off the face of the earth.

As I write, it may be, the fiat has gone forth dooming the old house off Botolph Lane to destruction ; in to-day's paper tenders for the building materials are invited for a far more ancient and interesting relic of Old London. Most of the famous taverns have gone—what, indeed, has not ? Why should you care, O overgrown and unwieldy City, so long as stocks and shares rise and fall—so long as bargains are to be made, and differences pocketed ?

You have swept the old away—will the new be better ? Romance must give way to Reality—Poetry to the Money Article in the daily papers. In the future who will be found possessed of sufficient courage to write a novel about your present ? The man does not exist, neither will he ever exist, who could evolve sentiment out of rows of warehouses and blocks of offices—your termini, your buildings, your cold, cheerless rooms, fitted with all the latest appliances of discomfort, where men sin and toil for money to be spent in homes they only sleep at. When Macaulay's *New Zealander* at last stands on that broken arch of London

Bridge and looks over your ruined city, let him breathe no sigh of regret, for with your own hand you will have long before destroyed everything worth regretting.

This is my plaint now ended. We may therefore go back to the marble-paved hall, to the panelled dining-room, the beautiful ceilings, and lovely chimney-pieces in Sir Christopher Wren's old home.





CHAPTER IV.

IN THE OLD HOUSE.

EVERYWHERE persons are to be met with leading lives which seem strange to their fellows.

Either they have dropped behind the world, or voluntarily stepped out from it. The causes that impel them to avoid contact with other human beings may be widely different, but the result is the same—an increasing dislike which finally becomes actual hatred to society of any sort.

Poverty, disappointment, over-sensitiveness, remorse, crime, sorrow—any one of these may drive a man to seek isolation from his kind.

In some cases circumstances extend his reputation far beyond the limits of local

gossip, as witness the 'celebrity which the most unhappy hermit of Stevenage finally attained ; but, as a rule, these "eccentric characters" are seldom heard of till they have ceased being odd for ever, when a newspaper paragraph tells us they were once living in our midst. There is no better place than London for indulging a fancy for solitude. In all parts of it there have ever been, and no doubt are now, people dwelling quite alone without friends, without employment, often without even visible means of support.

Death, or choice, or necessity has cut them loose from the ties of relationship ; if their lot was cast in some vast wilderness they could not be so desolate as in their voluntary exile from humanity.

To ordinary minds there is something appalling in the fact of such existences ; we lack the key which would perhaps unlock the mystery, and we also lack comprehension of how any misfortune, great though it may have been, should obtain such a mastery over the mind as to induce a living soul to practically cut itself off from the great congregation of

breathing, striving, struggling sympathetic men and women.

Think of the so-called "old witch of Stamford Street," and of her houses there and in Snow Hill, which she deliberately suffered to go to wreck and ruin merely to spite her heir. What a life that was to lead ! With means sufficient to render existence happy, useful, blessed, she burrowed in the wretched basement of one of her dilapidated dwellings, and dressed so that when she took her walks abroad the boys hooted her.

Think of the gentleman who in a past age shut himself up and dwelt alone near Fore Street, never stirring outside the door, or admitting anyone inside it, for fifty years. Consider that other gentleman of good fortune who for so long vegetated in a large suburban residence, keeping only one servant, a man whom he never permitted to enter his bedroom. Each day he bought a pound of candles, which he burnt ; a pound of coffee, which he drank ; and a pound of butter, wherewith he anointed himself. We do not call such people mad, yet surely they can scarcely be accounted sane.

To everyone with whom he came in contact Mr. G. Brisco, of Botolph Lane, was a puzzle. How or why he led the life he did seemed to them as inexplicable as the conduct of the person who stopped for the third of a century at "The Horns," Kennington, settling his bill every day, must have done to the then landlord of that inn. In every business transaction Mr. Brisco proved himself able and astute. His abilities were beyond the average. His speech and manners were those of a person superior to most of the individuals with whom he came in contact. How then did it, could it happen, people asked themselves, that he remained so poor, and held so resolutely aloof from help and ordinary intercourse?

He could not be in hiding, for he walked the City streets at high noon; it seemed incredible that he should be cruelly stinting himself in order to pay off any old debt. Nevertheless it seemed more incredible still that so clever a man could not make even a moderate income. For a time speculation exhausted itself about him; and then, seeing the same system of self-denial going on day

after day and year after year, curiosity almost died out, only reviving when any incident occurred to bring Mr. Brisco and his affairs again on the carpet.

There was nothing genial about him. He possessed a caustic tongue, and there were few who cared to test the quality of its edge twice.

"Do you come from Yorkshire?" inquired a man one day, whose name was Jopp.

"Did I ever ask you whether you came from Whitechapel?" was the retort.

"No — certainly not," said Mr. Jopp, wincing a little, for his maternal grandfather had been a butcher in that district.

"Then, if I wish to know nothing about your birthplace, why should you trouble yourself about mine?"

No matter what questions were put, Mr. Brisco answered them somewhat after this fashion. Where he had sprung from; how he chanced to be so poor; for what reason he lived so singular and isolated a life—were mysteries to those around him. Mr. Katzen's account of his mode of existence, though evolved from that gentleman's inner con-

sciousness, was in the main correct : his clothes were shabby, his person emaciated, his food of the poorest ; in that great house he dwelt solitarily, for he made no companion of the girl who had drifted quite by accident across his path.

But for her he would most probably have been starved to death long previously ; he certainly could not have struggled through an illness, brought on by cold and privation, except for the way in which she, at the time quite a child, nursed and tended him.

The interest of all the neighbours had then been aroused, and their sympathies quickened by the girl's devotion, by the man's mortal sickness.

Help and kindness were offered and accepted freely ; but whenever Mr. Brisco recovered from his delirium, and understood what was going on, he crushed their friendly feelings as ruthlessly as we have seen all beauty pressed out of a fair flower between the yellow leaves of some musty book.

After that he was left alone—the right hand of fellowship was not again extended. Naturally people do not like their good

offices repulsed. Few greeted him even as he passed up and down the lane, and those who did spoke coldly. He had sown, and he was reaping ; unlike some, the harvest seemed to his mind. He desired nothing from his fellows save to be left in peace—and at last his fellows were more than willing to gratify his desire. —

Between the old mansion and its occupant there existed a subtle sort of fitness not always to be found.

The latter-day type, for instance, of commonplace City man—loud-talking, familiar, easy in language as in morals ; hairy as Esau, giving promise of growing stouter than Ehud, who would have rejoiced to paint over the panels in the dining-room and had them picked out in red or blue by “some chap up to his business ;” kept sherry and champagne in a convenient cupboard ; sat preferably on the table with one foot stretched down to the floor while he roared over the jokes of his “pals,” “devilish good fellows” —might, though doubtless a useful and excellent person in his way, have appeared out of place in a dwelling where grave merchants

once resided and dispensed princely hospitality.

But in the sere and yellow leaf period of its life there seemed a certain fitness in seeing a wasted figure wandering like a ghost through the building—flitting from room to room in the twilight when business was over and the offices closed, and the men who occupied them during the day had departed, and a silence resembling death brooded over the house. It was then—clad in an old grey dressing-gown, and wearing a pair of list slippers that made no sound—he roamed through the solemn stillness, making no echo. In the moonlight, and when the stars were shining, he would pace the leads for hours, seeing in heaven the vision of only one angel—on earth but one great sorrow, his own. Coming suddenly in these vigils upon this spectre, anyone might have been excused who had taken him for one from the dead—his colourless face, his ragged beard, his straggling grey hair, often looked weird and awful in the unreal light by which preferably he took his rambles through the dim, deserted house, up and down the leads, both when the gas

lamps showed objects in a lurid transparency, and when the first streaks of dawn began to reveal the masts of the ships lying at anchor hard by, and the great City tied and bound in sleep.

There was no one, however, who did meet him unexpectedly at such times ; no—though often a young girl would run swiftly up the narrow staircase winding to the roof, and saying, “ It is too late ” (or “ too early,” as the case might be) “ for you to stop here any longer,” take his cold hand in hers and lead him away, unresisting, to bed.

This was the girl, grown tall and shapely, who had nursed him through that illness with a sage tenderness which won for her the suffrages of two parishes. As far as looks went she deserved all the praise Mr. Katzen thought fit to bestow on her.

She *was* pretty. She had dark hair, and dark, deep, beautiful eyes, and in her cheeks the rich mellow tint of a ripe peach showed through the clear brown of her complexion. Her waist was small and round, her figure upright, and—yet again Mr. Katzen was right—she did *not* look as though she were

starved ; rather she was the embodiment of young, vigorous, perfect health. Spite of all her night watches, her broken rest, her risings before the lark, or that bird's London equivalent, the nearest cock—all the terrible hardships and miseries of her early childhood—no stronger or more useful piece of vanity in her teens than Miss Abigail Weir could have been found in the four parishes close at hand, from corner to corner of which, “if it were not for the houses,” said the maiden, “we might play at ball.”

Poor, fatherless, friendless Abigail Weir—poor, cold, hungry, forlorn, desolate little waif—she had crossed Mr. Brisco's life after the strangest fashion. When first he came to the old house in Botolph Lane he resided there in utter solitude. Once the door closed behind the last clerk who left the offices, no human being remained to keep Mr. Brisco company. What he did in the long evenings could only be conjectured, and after a few months there were few who concerned themselves about the matter. Not a glimmer of light ever shone down into Love Lane from any window of the old house. Perhaps, as

Mr. Katzen suggested, he went to bed tired out, for he worked hard all day ; more likely already those restless wanderings, which as time passed on grew so frequent, had recurred ; there was space and to spare in the ancient building for abundant exercise. In the early morning a woman always appeared to "do up" the offices. Summer and winter, rain, hail, frost, or snow, she arrived from Water Lane, where she resided in the top story of a house, the basement and ground-floor of which were devoted to coals, coke, Sarson's vinegar in pint bottles, and green-grocery, and at once proceeded, without pausing even to remove her pinched and shabby black bonnet, to polish the grates, wash over the marble hearths, lay fires, and "wipe down" the stairs. Once a week there was a great cleaning, which occupied the whole of Saturday afternoon. There was much to do, but Mrs. Childs did it unassisted by even a pint of beer. Mr. Brisco was not a man to pay more to anyone than he bargained for.

Just, he might be. "For my part," Mrs. Childs stated, "I am not going to say against

that—what he tells you he'll do, he does. When he makes a bargain he sticks to it, but then it is all a bargain! He'd stand out for a week over a halfpenny; and as for perquisites, I haven't seen the colour of one in this old ramshackle house. I told him all the other gentlemen I'd served—and they were gentlemen, some of them making no more about putting their hand in their pockets and drawing out half a sovereign, or maybe a sovereign, at Christmas-time, than if it had been a shilling—let me have the papers and any bottles or waste there might be; but he snapped my nose off. 'You'll get neither paper nor waste here, Mrs. Childs,' he answered quick-like, just as though I'd wanted to steal something; 'I know enough about that sort of thing!'

“‘And precious little all your knowing has done for you,’ I thought to myself. No one can attend to his proper business, and look after cheese-parings too. If he had not made himself so fast, taking the bread out of poor people's mouths, in a manner of speaking, he might have had a better coat to his back this day; and that's my opinion,

and I don't care if he hears me saying so!"

For the space of what good Mrs. Childs called two weary years she had "done" for Mr. Brisco by contract—she had scrubbed, blacklead, hearthstoned, window-cleaned, brick-dusted, and emery-powdered for that gentleman all at — per week, oilman's goods included. She did not indeed bear the heat and burden of her labour entirely alone. On Saturdays, and sometimes on other days when extra work was in progress, she brought with her a niece called Sophia, to which name Mrs. Childs gave an additional charm by pronouncing it "Sophiar." Sophia had a large head, no neck worth mentioning, no discernible waist whatever, thick ankles, big flat feet, and awkward hands with stout red arms to match. She always kept her mouth open, and usually came furnished with a good cold. She had round colourless eyes, very light hair, fat cheeks, a face well dotted over with freckles, and she was not quite wise.

Had the genius and knowledge, however, of all the generations of this world from its creation been centred in Sophia's person,

Mrs. Childs could not have spoken more highly of her cleverness, or laid more stress on it. '

"She is able to clean a room as well as I can," the aunt was wont to say triumphantly. "You wouldn't believe the work she gets through. You should just see my boards: they're as white as snow," which was not, perhaps, so much a matter to be wondered at, since sometimes, when the fit took her, Sophia would scrub out Mrs. Child's front room half-a-dozen times in a day.

The aunt was constantly getting the niece "little places," giving her the best of characters, and the highest of recommendations; but as Sophia, in addition to several other failings, had many personal habits prejudiced individuals, unaccustomed to "make allowances," were disagreeable enough to find fault with, Sophia as a rule never kept her situations beyond four-and-twenty hours; then Sophia, her cold, and her wardrobe (wrapped neatly up in a square piece of old black cashmere), returned to Mrs. Childs' roof-tree, where she gave that worthy woman an agreeable insight into the domestic affairs

of the family foolish enough to decline her further services.

A cruel lapse of memory on the part of Nature had sent Sophia into the world without a palate; but Mrs. Childs understood her speech well enough to gather there was scarcely a house in the district destitute of what she termed a "skellington."

For two years, then, she had been spending her health and strength in the ungrateful task of trying so to please Mr. Brisco as to wring from him a higher weekly wage—when, "one Wednesday evening as ever was," after office hours she had to go to the old house to "clear up the mess" left by a departing tenant, who had occupied two offices on the first-floor and the whole of the extensive basement.

The place was in a "fine litter," in such a litter indeed that both Mrs. Childs and Sophia, when they surveyed the scene of future action, stood for a moment appalled.

As regarded the cellar, they had nothing to do. By order of the departing tenant, his man swept the straw and rubbish up into a heap, for the next comer to have cleared

away at his leisure ; but the offices, so Mrs. Childs affirmed, “ made her flesh creep.”

The gentleman who rented them had never, for a matter of twelve months, let anyone into them except when he was present, and “ I leave you to guess,” said Mrs. Childs, “ only you nor nobody could guess, the state those two rooms were in !”

It was a bitter night in January. Snow lay thick in the courtyard. Not a star could be seen.

“ I had to kindle a spark of fire to hot a drop of water, so as to keep my hands from being numbed with the cold—long as I have been ‘going out,’” Mrs. Childs’ favourite technical ellipsis, “ I never remember such a cruel job as that. I don’t know how we got through with it ; but we did somehow, all but the windows, which I told Mr. Brisco I couldn’t and I wouldn’t undertake in the dark. I had only the dusting to finish and the putting to rights to see to, so I thought I’d just send Sophiar home, and let her be getting a mouthful of supper ready—I’m sure we both wanted it bad enough—and I stopped on and was settling up the rooms, for the fresh

tenant wanted to come in next morning, when who should appear sudden but Mr. Brisco. He had on an old coat, and he held a dark lantern in his hand, and his face was the colour of chalk; and when I saw him a sort of trembling came over me—for I thought of Guy Faux, and that we were all alone in that great house, parted off from the world as one might say. You see, the offices where I was at work didn't look out on Love Lane, but faced the square; and I knew he might murder me a dozen times and nobody could hear me."

"Mrs. Childs," said Mr. Brisco, who certainly had not the smallest intention of killing and slaying that estimable woman, "do you know anything about children?"

Certainly the question seemed strange, but Mrs. Childs was in her own opinion equal to answering that or any other which might be propounded. Nevertheless, as true genius is always modest, her reply partook of that quality.

"Well, sir, it's not for me to say—I never was one to talk about my own doings; but when you come to a matter of six poor little

dears left motherless, Sophiar being the eldest but two of the lot, and me a struggling widow, and their father out of his head with grief, and losing his rest, and not in work besides, I think——”

“Yes, Mrs. Childs, and so do I. Kindly oblige me by stepping down into the cellar for a minute.”

“Into the cellar, sir!” returned Mrs. Childs, now quite satisfied Mr. Brisco had gone suddenly mad. “If you’ll excuse me, sir, I’d rather not.”

“Oh, but you must,” he persisted; “there’s a little girl there, and I don’t know what to make of her.”

“A little girl!” repeated Mrs. Childs. “There can’t be any little girl in the cellar.”

“There is, though,” he persisted. “I thought I would see all was safe below, but I had hardly got to the bottom of the steps when I felt that I was not alone—that somebody or something besides myself was in the place. I threw the light round and about, but I could see nothing. Then I listened and heard a faint gasping noise. Guided by the sound, I made my way to a heap of straw

and dirt the men had piled against the old wine-bin—still I could see nothing ; but when I tossed the straw over, expecting to find a cat or dog, I saw a child. Come down—I can't tell whether she is dying or not."

Still properly and prudently incredulous, but feeling nevertheless very certainly that "you could have knocked me down with a feather," Mrs. Childs reluctantly followed Mr. Brisco downstairs ("I wouldn't have gone first had it been ever so," she subsequently stated), and into the huge basement of the old house.

The cold was piercing, the air of the cellar struck chill and damp like a grave ; the weird light of Mr. Brisco's lantern cast strange reflections on the paved floor, on the roof tapestried with years of dust and generations of cobwebs. Packed up against one of the wine-bins was a mound of straw and rubbish, and half buried amongst this lay a little figure stretched out full-length, apparently asleep, and moaning as if suffering cruelly.

"Is she dying?" asked Mr. Brisco, holding his lantern so that the rays fell full on the child's face.

“Dying! not a bit of it—she’s shamming, that’s what she’s at. Here, what are you doing? Get up out of that!” and suiting her action to her words, Mrs. Childs with a vigorous jerk dragged the creature from its lair on to the hard cold floor. “I’ll give you something!” she added. “I’ll teach you to sneak into houses. Now don’t go on making believe. Stand up on your feet, and tell us where you come from.”

Staggering as if she were drunk, the girl opened great dark eyes of terror, and crying, “Don’t beat me, don’t beat me—I wasn’t doing anything!” fell, a poor bundle of tatters, at Mr. Brisco’s feet.

“What can we do?” asked that gentleman helplessly.

“If you’ll stop here, sir, I’ll run for the police,” answered Mrs. Childs, greatly excited. “Likely as not there’s a gang of them about, and they’ve smuggled her in to open the door in the dead of night;” and Mrs. Childs was about to speed on her errand, when Mr. Brisco stopped her.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “Don’t go just yet.”

"We'll all be murdered in our beds!" exclaimed Mrs. Childs.

"Be calm. You won't, at any rate," he answered. "This girl is starved," he went on, raising her. "Poor little wretch! I wonder where she comes from."

"She's no good, wherever she comes from," was the reply evolved in a wonderful spirit of prophecy from Mrs. Childs' internal consciousness. "You'd best not touch her, sir—like enough, if so be she's not shamming, she's sickening for fever or smallpox. It won't take me a minute to fetch a policeman. He'll soon make my lady speak. They're up to all these sorts of dodgings and devices."

Mr. Brisco did not take the slightest notice of the charwoman's suggested advice. For answer, he only carried the waif back to her bed of broken straw, piled some of it over her emaciated body, and then saying, "If you have finished upstairs, I need not detain you any longer," made way for her to precede him, which, after a feint of shrinking back, and "You go first, sir," Mrs. Childs did with an alacrity that savoured of fear.



CHAPTER V.

MRS. CHILDS INTERROGATED.

PROBABLY in the whole of London no cleaner house could have been found than Mrs. Jeffley's.

It was scoured, and hearth-stoned, and polished, and chamois-leathered, till its darkest places absolutely shone.

"There is no hole-and-corner work in my place," Mrs. Jeffley declared with natural pride, and this was quite true. Her linen, got up in the country, smelt sweet and wholesome ; every day her floors were washed over ; every week her windows were cleaned ; every morning her step was whitened ; every Wednesday and Saturday her kitchen was turned inside out. She did not stint soap, or powder, or soda, or Bath-brick, or emery powder, or

anything the oilman in Crutched Friars with whom she dealt could provide.

Her house was clean as a new pin ; there was literally no dirt about it, save that conveyed away into Water Lane hard by, each night, by one person, and that person Mrs. Childs.

As the Israelites sent the devoted goat laden with all their sins out into that great and terrible wilderness, so Mrs. Childs on her own person seemed, when she bade good-night, to bear off the accumulated grime of each long day. Years of charing had come and gone since she left Mr. Brisco and took service under Mrs. Jeffley ; indeed, her departure from the one situation and her entrance into the other was more rapid than the transit of the twelve tribes from the plains of Moab across the Jordan. A land of promise Fowkes' Buildings truly proved to one who had long been wandering through the arid wilderness of a house "let out in offices," and where, to quote Mrs. Childs' forcible simile, there was not enough "food lying over to feed a flea." Leaving Mr. Brisco was her own act and deed, yet she never forgave him

for totally severing the connection. "With a 'look in' from me now and again," she was wont to declare, "Sophiar could have got through all there was to do and more, and the few halfpence would have come in handy, rubbing along as I am forced to do."

Being compelled to "rub along" without the assistance of Mr. Brisco's halfpence, Mrs. Childs concentrated her remarkable powers of mind on pleasing Mrs. Jeffley, which she did with such success that, though cooks and housemaids, "generals" and "plains," came and went, she remained.

It might have been thought that in so thriving and well-managed an establishment the work could have been got through without the aid of an outsider. This was not so, however, and Mrs. Childs knew the reason why. Mrs. Jeffley could not keep her servants. Young and old—plain and pretty, fair and dark, short and tall—English, Irish, Scotch, and foreign—Churchwomen, "Romans" (as Mrs. Childs termed the creed presided over by his Holiness the Pope), Dissenters of all colours and every imaginable shade—an ad-

vanced lady who believed in nothing—the result was the same.

Sometimes one of these various persons “put in” three months, but, as a rule, four weeks proved more than sufficient. The number of servants Mrs. Childs had “spoke to friendly” when they arrived was only equalled by the number who had “taken themselves off” with only a nasty toss of their heads; the boxes dragged by them upstairs in faith, were pretty evenly balanced by those lugged down into the hall with much burning of spirit and secret malediction.

Tireless herself, Mrs. Jeffley thought those in receipt of wages should be tireless too. Ever ready to please any liberal lodger, Mrs. Jeffley could not conceive what Kate and Ann and Polly found to grumble about, when asked to do the simplest thing not in the regular routine.

She, however, was working for herself; they were working for her. Naturally, Kate, Ann, and Polly took a different view of the matter. Perhaps it was wrong for them to do so, but the naturalness cannot be denied. What almost passes belief, however, is, that

Mrs. Jeffley went on hoping one day she would meet with a paragon. "Just like you, Mrs. Childs," she often said, "but who has no encumbrance, and can live in the house."

"That's the very thing you want, ma'am," agreed Mrs. Childs; "and I only wish I could tell you where to lay your hand on a person who would see to you and think for you and consider you as you ought to be considered and thought for and seen to."

Mrs. Childs never was able to tell Mrs. Jeffley where to find the domestic phoenix she desired to capture, neither did she offer herself as a substitute for the more splendid and complete ideal that lady had formed.

Mrs. Childs was, indeed, to put the affair in homely phrase, far too old a bird to be caught by chaff, or anything else. Pounds of lime would have failed to snare her. Better to her seemed the old bed in Water Lane, in which the feathers were well nigh dust, than all the new-fangled spring and horsehair mattresses in Mrs. Jeffley's house; better the Pembroke table drawn triangular-wise almost to the hobs, the tea brewed till black, the muffins toasted by Sophia's fingers—the

“relish” of whatever kind it might be—than all the “waste and plenty” of the kitchen in Fowkes’ Buildings.

“I must keep a home for the sake of the children,” she was wont to declare, and though the children—who, by the way, were not hers—never came near their devoted aunt, and, with the exception of that charming fixture “Sophiar,” made themselves conspicuous by their absence, the excuse served its purpose of standing between Mrs. Childs and a too eager world.

This was the reason she appeared each morning in Fowkes’ Buildings with the milk, clad in severe black worn in memory of no one in particular; and provided with two aprons—a holland of surpassing and surprising whiteness, and a “coarse,” which, though rough in the grain, and unbeautiful as regards texture, was also clean and capable of enduring many things.

When she left at night, both aprons, as well as Mrs. Childs herself, were black as if they had all been up a few of the Fowkes’ Buildings chimneys. Layer after layer of dirt had been steadily painted on; the filth

of the whole house seemed to be accumulated on Mrs. Childs' own person—floors, fires, knives, boots, coal-cellar, grates, kettles, carpets, were laid under contribution, and the result was a finished whole of griminess not to be described in words.

As for meals—though, when the subject was much and gracefully pressed, Mrs. Childs felt she could not always be refusing to “sit down”—the devoted woman preferred to take them standing.

She had a “mouthful” of bread-and-cheese while washing-up the breakfast things, and she dearly liked a glass of beer standing beside her in the sink—not that Mrs. Childs was a glutton, or given in the smallest degree to intemperance; but these modes of victualing enabled her at once to maintain the physical strength she needed, and to keep her industry well in evidence.

“The best of them,” said Mrs. Childs oracularly, the term referring to employers, “are apt, if they see you resting for a minute, to think you are lazying.”

As a general principle, it may be laid down that servants do not like a master or mistress

whom they can fool. Under the "iron-heel" *employés* produce their best work, develop the sweetest virtues. After all, reduced to plain words, what was the rule of that golden time when men and women stopped twenty, thirty, forty years in one employ, but one of the strictest despotism? It was then man and master, slave and owner; now the tables are reversed. Mrs. Jeffley, who would have been a most kind and considerate slave-owner, did not find without eternal harrying she could get her labour performed properly, even for large wages; and Mrs. Childs, who was able to get through an enormous amount of work for twelve shillings a week and her food, in her heart despised Mrs. Jeffley, and considered how much better she could have managed a house, had heaven only given her some money, and a connection, and a soft, easy, good-natured "fool of a husband" like Mr. Jeffley.

But Mrs. Childs did her work. Early and late, and during the whole day, she was at everybody's beck and call. She knew on which side her bread was buttered. For the first time during her widowed life she

had fallen into clover, and she did not mean to be turned out of it if she could avert such a calamity.

Nevertheless, in the strongest citadels there is oftentimes a weak point of which the citadels themselves are not aware. Mrs. Jeffley's weak point was vanity, and Mrs. Childs knew that. Mrs. Childs' weak point was Sophia, and Mrs. Jeffley knew that. Some day, it might be, Mrs. Childs' valour would overcome her discretion; who could tell? If ever that day arrived, for a certainty she would charge the enemy's camp, and while inflicting 'great disaster come to grief. Meantime, she was poor, patient, hard-working, willing Mrs. Childs, waiting quietly on that Whit-Monday night in Mrs. Jeffley's kitchen, till it should please her mistress to appear, and signify that she wanted nothing more.

She had waited a long time—one apron coiled up around her waist as though it had been the tail of a serpent; the other packed into a roll like a currant dumpling. On the kitchen table lay tied in a cloth the things she had been told she could take home.

During the course of twelve hours, liberal, impulsive, silly Mrs. Jeffley was wont to bestow many such benefactions. One by one Mrs. Childs laid them on a shelf which came to be devoted exclusively to her “perqs.,” till—before the witching-time, which beheld her vanish, arrived—a goodly assortment of eatables was collected.

Mrs. Childs had taken possession of a chair. In spite of the unusual circumstance of having given herself a “rub over,” she looked extremely dirty, and she was almost asleep; but when Mrs. Jeffley, in a brown silk dress, came rustling into the kitchen, the poor toiler woke again instantly, and, rising, stood in a deferential attitude awaiting her employer’s pleasure.

“I am afraid we have kept you sadly late to-night,” said Mrs. Jeffley.

“Oh! that don’t signify, ’m—not at all, ’m. I thought I would wait in case you wanted anything more. Susan has gone to bed—I told her I knew you wouldn’t wish her to sit up. Poor girl! she has to be astir early.”

“Yes; and she seems a capital one for

early rising. I really think she will do," said Mrs. Jeffley, strong in that faith which usually, when the sweeping of new brooms is in question, endures for about a week.

"She seems a very still sort of young person," answered Mrs. Childs, who excelled in a species of damnatory acquiescence.

"I think she will do. I hope she will," repeated Mrs. Jeffley. "Well, I won't keep you any longer."

"You are sure there is nothing else you can remember, 'm?"—which speech might indeed have been dictated by a spirit of subtle irony. "Because you know, 'm, I'll do it with pleasure."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Childs. I'm sure you must be tired enough. You have had your supper?"

"Susan wanted me to take some along of her," was the two-edged answer, "but I thought I'd wait, and eat a mouthful at home with the child. Even if she's gone to bed, nothing will content her poor heart but to rise the minute she hears my foot on the stair."

Having finished which affecting statement,

Mrs. Childs re-tied her bonnet, re-adjusted her old rusty shawl, and, taking up her bundle, remarked :

“ These are the pieces, 'm, you were so good as to tell me I might have.”

“ You have not forgotten the knuckle of ham ?”

“ No, 'm.”

“ Nor the piece of steak-pie ?”

“ No, 'm.”

“ Nor the remainder of that bread-and-butter pudding ?”

“ No, 'm ; which'll all make a nice bit of picking for Sophiar to-morrow.”

“ And remind me to look you out the pair of boots I was talking about.”

“ I'm sure, 'm, I return you many thanks.”

“ No need to do that,” said Mrs. Jeffley. “ Oh ! I knew there was something I wanted to ask you. Do you ever now see the girl that lives with Mr. Brisco ?”

Mrs. Childs laid down her bundle again—she understood there was more to follow.

“ Yes, 'm, I see her often—but never to speak to. When we meets, as we can't help meeting, she either looks straight before her,

or else turns her head away, as if I was beneath eyes to rest on."

"She has grown very pretty, I hear," hazarded Mrs. Jeffley, half showing her hand.

"She wouldn't be my taste," answered Sophia's aunt, with a good deal of acrimony.

"But she is pretty, is she not?"

"Well, 'm, every man has his own notion of beauty. I've even heard of some as admires a cast; so it's quite likely Miss Weir may have found somebody that thinks her a Venus because she's a tawny. My idea of beauty is a good complexion; but that may be owing to my knowing no better."

"She is very dark, then, is she?" asked Mrs. Jeffley, with whose face no fault could have been found on that score.

"There are those might call her dark. I'd say she was yellow," was the uncompromising reply.

"Like a gipsy?" suggested Mrs. Jeffley tentatively.

"Not exactly; gipsies have beautiful black flashing eyes, and coal-black hair with a wave in it. What people find to talk about in Miss

Abigail Weir beats me ; to my notion she is most ordinary."

"People do talk about her, then?"

"Yes ; just the common sort, you understand—not ladies like you, 'm, but the poorer kind of shopkeepers round the lanes. It is her impudence does it," finished Mrs. Childs viciously. "If ever there was a saucy young slut, it is the girl I saw with my own two eyes found in Mr. Brisco's cellar by Mr. Brisco himself ; and if he doesn't rue the day he didn't take my offer to run for the nearest policeman, I'll——"

At this point Mrs. Childs paused, simply because she really could think of no alternative strong enough to fit the position.

"But what is the matter with the girl?" asked Mrs. Jeffley.

"In a manner of speaking, everything," was the answer ; "she's bad, root and branch. I know things about her she mayn't like to hear one of these days : and if I have much more of her nonsense, I'll up and tell her what she believes is dead and forgotten. I declare it makes me sick to see her running into the Rectory, and tripping about St.

Mary-at-Hill as if the parish belonged to her. My word, if it hadn't been for the foolishness of that poor old man, she'd have been brought up in the workhouse, and forced to get her living harder than she does."

It is improbable that Mrs. Childs had ever read Shakespeare, yet while she spoke she felt stirring within her the spirit which prompted the Duchess to say :

"Could I come near your beauty with my nails,
I'd set my ten commandments in your face."

As she stood beside the table with the light from the lowered gas throwing her features a little into shadow, she looked very shrewish and vixenish indeed.

As a rule, Mrs. Childs sheathed her claws, but on the subject of Miss Weir she could not speak with equanimity ; the rise of that young person stirred all her venom. She was wont to go out of her way often only in order to meet Abigail, and on the occasion of these encounters her scorn and disgust equalled that "upstart's" own pride.

There had been between them passages of arms with which the world was not ac-

quainted, and though they now maintained a strict neutrality so far as speech went, it was armed on both sides. As James Hannay said about the war between the Grocers and Licensed Victuallers, at a time when the wine and tea controversy had reached its height, "If the one charged with grape, the other returned with canister;" so Mrs. Childs and Miss Weir were both keeping their powder dry for any emergency which might ensue.

"I have never been quite able to understand——" began Mrs. Jeffley. "But I am keeping you, Mrs. Childs."

"Don't speak about that, 'm; it's a pleasure to serve you. As I've often said, as Sophiar could tell you, it was like getting into heaven out of the worse place to change from Botolph Lane to Fowkes' Buildings. How I ever stopped there so long I'm sure I don't know. Begging your pardon for interrupting you, 'm, you were saying——"

"That I don't understand where such a girl could have got so well educated. Mr. Katzen says she knows as much as if she had been to a good boarding-school."

“The cat’s out of the bag at last,” thought Mrs. Childs. “You wonder, ’m, where she got her learning?” she added aloud. “I can tell you. First of all, she’s sharp as a gimlet—she’d pick up a thing and be away with it while another would be looking about to see where it was; and then next, some of them Sisters got hold of her, or she got hold of them, and she was ‘such a little dear,’ and such a ‘clever maid,’ and so ‘good’ and ‘quiet,’ and ‘so much attached to her benefactor,’ that they gave her the best of learning and lots of presents; and she, as one may say, just picked out of the gutter. It’s a shame such things should be allowed, while those that are deserving and really in need of help couldn’t get half a pound of tea—no! not if they were to go down on their bended knees for it.”

“How old was she, do you suppose, that night when she got into Mr. Brisco’s house? Ten, wasn’t it?”

“She told me she was getting on for eleven, but there, ’m, if I never stir again, I wouldn’t believe a word she spoke. She’s a hundred, if she’s a day, in craft and wicked-

ness, and mischief-making. There's Mrs. Hart, at the milk-shop ; many and many a pint of skim, and two or three eggs, she has slipped to me when I've gone in for a loaf, wet and draggled and tired—till missy came, then all was changed. Of course, Mrs. Hart serves me now civilly, like anybody else ; but no more nice little helps to make both ends meet. I say it's cruel—that I do !”

“Mr. Katzen seems to have a great opinion of her.”

“I hope he mayn't find cause to change it, 'm,” said Mrs. Childs, in a tone which somehow turned the aspiration into a curse, and so overwhelmed Mrs. Jeffley's limited understanding, that she allowed Sophia's aunt to betake herself to Water Lane without asking any further question.





CHAPTER VI.

MISS WEIR.

THE interview with Mrs. Childs, so far from assuaging Mrs. Jeffley's curiosity, merely served to whet it. She could scarcely remember the time, since her first acquaintance with Mr. Katzen, when the name of Abigail Weir was unknown to her ; but till quite recently she had only heard it spoken casually by him, or spitefully by Mrs. Childs. Nothing could have been imagined further from her thoughts than that this girl—this stray—the funny little energetic old woman, as Mr. Katzen while Abby was still a child dubbed her, half in jest and half in earnest, should cross the field of her life, and throw a shadow upon it.

Yet already she felt as though something

of the sort had happened ; and the same nervous restlessness which impels a person to open a door, or turn his head to look on an unpleasant sight, urged her on to obtain an interview with a young lady she had hitherto thought of, when she thought of her at all, merely as an insignificant little chit.

It is not exactly the fault of such little chits that they have a way of shooting up suddenly into attractively pretty girls, yet the elders of their own sex generally regard this progression as a sin.

Mr. Katzen's words had fallen with the force of a blow on poor Mrs. Jeffley, who really, spite of her many excellent qualities, was not much wiser than most women. A faithful wife and fond mother, no thought calculated to wrong Jack, save as regards her estimate of his intellectual capacity, had ever entered, or was ever likely to enter, her mind ; but jealousy, as it ordinarily presents itself, is sexless, and Mrs. Jeffley certainly felt jealous of this vague girl who had thrust herself upon the new Consul's notice.

Further, if he took her for wife, no friend could possibly regard such a match as desir-

able. A waif who had come from heaven only knew where, and was living with a man as poor as Job and as morose as Diogenes ; who had, in the days when, like a strange, half-starved cat, she was first suffered to stay on in the old house, in the fulness of her little heart—or, as Mrs. Childs more happily phrased the matter, “in her uppishness”—whitened the steps, and black-leaded the grates, and dusted the offices, and taken a job out of Sophia’s hands, must drag a husband down to the earth. Mr. Katzen might as well propose to marry one of the wandering maidens who, under the guise of useful servants, were always coming to Fowkes’ Buildings, ostensibly to do some work, but really only to obtain food and wages. The thing was appalling, and yet Mrs. Jeffley feared he had spoken more in earnest than in jest.

“I must see this dreadful pert creature,” she thought, and she lay awake for a long time picturing how she could easily bring about an interview, and deciding the very words which should be uttered in the course of conversation.

It was Mrs. Jeffley's excellent practice to do all her marketing in person. The joints, the fish, the vegetables she left to the discretion of no tradesman whatsoever.

Hail, rain, shine, she repaired to Billingsgate and Leadenhall, where she made her purchases for the day, stinting in nothing, yet obtaining all she required at the lowest rates—a fact the good woman frequently mentioned.

No doubt, an admirable manager! She said so herself often, and the sentiment was chorused by all with whom she came in contact, even by Mrs. Childs. Whenever, indeed, Mrs. Jeffley sang a song in her own praise—a matter of not unusual occurrence—Mrs. Childs always took up the refrain. Even if she did not allow her voice to be audible, she was wont to shake her head after the manner of one who conceived words to be insufficient for the purpose of extolling Mrs. Jeffley's cleverness.

Therefore, it did seem rather insincere that in the seclusion of the upper floor she rented in Water Lane, she should say to Sophia :

“ Ah—h—h ! it's easy to buy when you've

got money to buy with ; the trouble is to buy when you ain't."

Hearing which axiom Sophia, who, like all half-witted creatures, delighted to lie and cheat over a farthing, was wont to swell and shake her fat cheeks with silent laughter, and indulge in some of those grimaces which had won the sobriquet of "Punch" from the rude youth of the neighbourhood.

In the watches of the night Mrs. Jeffley made up her mind as to how she should approach Miss Weir. She would rub on no war-paint ; she would not even appal her with the glories of that brown silk laid aside so recently. No ; she decided to go adorned merely with sweet simplicity, a resolution which the memory that her chintz costume was a love, and beautifully made, fitting her indeed like a glove, fully confirmed. Mrs. Mountly had sent it home at twelve o'clock on Saturday night, just in time to wear on Sunday morning ; and old Captain Hassell had said, with an unholy oath, Mrs. Jeffley did not look an hour over eighteen in it. That and her brown hat, which was so tastefully trimmed—silk and velvet two shades,

and finished off with real ostrich feathers, small and elegant—what could be better? Altogether, the dress in which to encounter Miss Weir for the first time; certainly the dress most suitable for such a neighbourhood, and becoming, moreover, to a fair woman like herself, possessed moreover of light crinkly hair, bright hazel eyes, well-defined eyebrows, and a good set of teeth.

For a long time Mrs. Jeffley had felt so satisfied as to the *bonâ fides* of her mature charms that she had not thought of enumerating them. Now, however, she went over the list as a needy man might count the money in his pocket.

Yes, they were all there—while dressing next morning she considered them singly and collectively as she stood before the glass—not a solitary item was lacking; in detail as well as in mass, she beheld Mrs. Maria Jeffley, “whose equal,” said her many devoted admirers, “it would have been hard to find.”

To a captious taste, the worst of Mrs. Jeffley was that when you had seen her once you had seen her always. This defect is one inseparable from the style of beauty in which

Nature deemed it best to clothe her. Some faces that when first beheld on canvas seem most lovely and greatly to be desired, finally become absolutely maddening because of their unchanging monotony. There are no depths in the eyes to fathom, or lurking sadness of expression to stimulate speculation ; no unuttered words of reproach or tenderness seem trembling on their lips ; the curves and lines never even in fancy vary and deepen ; for ever they remain the same, in joy or in sorrow, gazing down from the wall with cold, unsympathetic beauty. It was thus with Mrs. Jeffley. Her good looks, her well-fed, well-satisfied, prosperous expression seemed an affront, not to the extraordinary specimens of humanity that filled her house and purse, but to ordinary, troubled, anxious, suffering, yearning humanity such as we daily encounter surging along the highways and byways of our mighty London.

One person, however, at all events felt quite satisfied with Mrs. Maria Jeffley's face as she saw it reflected in the mirror, and that person was Maria Jeffley herself. She had grown older, and stouter, and harder,

and more assured, by such slow degrees that the alterations wrought by time were absolutely imperceptible to the lady most interested in them.

If she had passed eighteen, she was something much better—a woman in her prime. She did not fear comparison with Miss Weir or Miss anybody. Marketing of course could not be deferred, but on her return from Leadenhall she decided to honour Botolph Lane with a visit.

Mrs. Jeffley had never been to the old house; as a rule, her own affairs provided sufficient of interest and occupation to prevent meddling with those of other people; but now she really did feel curious and somewhat anxious on the subject of a strange girl who might at one fell swoop deprive her of an eligible lodger and a confidential friend. As she pondered these matters her heart waxed hot within her, and she determined Miss Weir should not have things all her own way without a struggle.

Passing through the gateway that still affords ingress from Botolph Lane to the wide courtyard on which the old house seems

to look sorrowfully, Mrs. Jeffley picked her steps over the rough pavement.

Even she, accustomed to London and its broad and sudden contrasts, felt it strange to turn out of the noisy, crowded, narrow lane, blocked with carts, where progress even on foot was difficult, into this still nook of the old City, which seemed to have been borne hither at some remote period on the restless sea of human life, and left stranded by the waters that had, since it was built, ebbed out of this world, to flow back over the remembered shores no more for ever.

Something which Mrs. Jeffley subsequently termed "a creeping" began to trouble that worthy lady. As one first landing on foreign soil examines tree and shrub and flower and shell and bird, so this explorer, who candidly said she "wasn't much of a one for old ruins, or old abbeys, or old women, or old bones, or old anything, though she liked to see what other people saw," was impelled to pause and look at the dog-kennel under the steps leading up to the main entrance ; at the dog-lap hollowed in the stones ; at the flat oblong canopy over the hall door, under the shadow of which great

men and fair ladies must long ago have stood gazing westward at the setting sun.

The door was wide open, and Mrs. Jeffley, having slowly ascended the stone steps, and paused beside the iron railing and glanced round the enclosed square, could see the beautiful marble pavement, and the long stretch of black and white diamonds that paved the hall.

She was standing staring at this and the noble old staircase at the farther end, when a door to her left opened, and a young girl holding a piece of needlework in her hand appeared.

Mrs. Jeffley had not rung, though her fingers were on the handle of the bell, and the girl seemed somewhat surprised to see anyone at the door.

"What is it?" she asked, not brusquely or pertly, but in the same matter-of-fact way in which a shopman repeats his formula: "What can I show you?" and then each stood "at ease."

"*You* can't be Miss Weir," thought Mrs. Jeffley, "and yet you must be. Dear me, what a complexion!"

But she only said aloud :

“ Mr. Brisco lives here, does he not ? ”

“ Yes ; but he is not in now. Will you leave any message ? ”

“ I did not want to see him particularly,” answered Mrs. Jeffley. “ Perhaps you can tell me if Mrs. Childs still works for him ? ”

“ Gracious ! no ; she has not for these six years past ! ”

“ Oh ! ” and Mrs. Jeffley added nothing more, but stood wondering how it would be best to continue the conversation.

Very obligingly Miss Weir took that trouble off her hands.

“ If you *particularly* wish to find Mrs. Childs,” she began, laying a spiteful emphasis on the “ particularly,” “ she used to live over a greengrocer’s shop in Water Lane, just beyond Fowkes’ Buildings. Even in case she has moved, it is unlikely she can have gone very far away.”

“ She will not be coming back here to work, I suppose ? ”

“ Not if I have anything to do with the matter ! ”

“And you have——”

“Everything!” supplied Miss Weir, with a promptness little less than appalling.

“Is she not a good worker, then?”

“She is good enough, so far as I know, but we don’t want her here, and we are not going to have her.”

“You are very decided about the matter.”

“Very,” was Abigail’s answer.

“What a fine old house this seems!” said Mrs. Jeffley, still standing on the step and addressing the girl who stood in the hall.

“It *is* a fine old house,” amended Miss Weir, not rudely, for she spoke with a pleasant smile.

“I never saw a handsomer hall.”

Abby turned her head a little and glanced round at the marble floor and the wide oak staircase. Then she looked at Mrs. Jeffley, and smiled again.

“Is it here,” asked her visitor, driven almost to her wits’ end, “that there is a panelled room painted beautifully all over?”

“We have a room,” was the reply, “the door and panels of which are painted. Should you like to see it?”

“Of all things,” joyfully exclaimed Mrs. Jeffley. “How very kind you are !”

“Oh no, not at all,” said Abigail deprecatingly, and then she motioned Mrs. Jeffley to precede her into the apartment from which she had just emerged, delightedly walking after that lady, and with a sense of the keenest enjoyment raising herself first on one foot and then on the other behind the unsuspecting Maria’s back.

Heaven only knows what Mrs. Jeffley had expected, but at all events she did not find it. A moderate-sized room with two windows; an old Turkey carpet on the floor; a large office-table in the centre; a few chairs; walls—so Mrs. Jeffley subsequently stated—“nearly as black as my shoe,” with a “lot of Indians sprawling about over them,” formed a whole little calculated to strike an utterly common and conventional woman with astonishment.

Mrs. Jeffley’s only amazement was that anyone could be found to admire so dull and sombre an apartment.

“It is very dark,” she said.

“We do not get the sun till the afternoon,” suggested Abigail mischievously.

“And what is the meaning of all these things?” asked Mrs. Jeffley, pointing with her parasol to the paintings by Robinson.

“We should all be so glad if anyone could tell us that,” replied the girl.

“I can’t make it out at all,” complained Mrs. Jeffley, wandering hopelessly from scene to scene. “Here is something like a church, and they have got a cat in this boat, and I wonder what that lady can be doing among all those savages?”

“Haven’t a notion,” said Abigail, who stood beside the table hemming most industriously.

“I am afraid I must be detaining you,” observed Mrs. Jeffley, pausing in her addled efforts to understand enigmas which had puzzled far wiser heads than hers.

“No; you see I am going on with my work,” answered Abigail, taking a reel of cotton out of her pocket and threading her needle afresh. “Please look at the panels as long as you like.”

“Thank you,” and Mrs. Jeffley regarded, as if in rapt wonderment, a particularly jolly-

looking savage riding with a companion on a rhinoceros.

"*He* always puts me in good spirits," remarked the girl. "Here he is again, you see, in this chariot drawn by antelopes."

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Mrs. Jeffley.

"No, and I do not believe anyone else ever did," laughed Abby. "He is the funniest creature."

Her visitor looked at the speaker doubtfully.

"You are Miss Weir, I suppose?" she hazarded.

"Yes; I am Miss Weir," agreed Abigail.

"And I am Mrs. Jeffley," in a tone as though she had said, "I am Victoria, by the grace of God Queen of Great Britain and Ireland."

"Are you really?" said Abigail, with well-feigned astonishment; "why, Mrs. Childs left us to go to you."

Mrs. Jeffley was not much given to changing colour; as she was wont to remark, forgetting how many a true word is spoken in jest, her "blushing-days were over"—but under the steady gaze of Miss Weir's wicked

eyes she felt a crimson wave rise even to her temples.

It was quite necessary to say something, so she said it :

“Yes—Mrs. Childs left you to come to me. She has been with me ever since.”

“I suppose I ought to congratulate you,” observed Abigail demurely.

“You can do about that as you please,” retorted Mrs. Jeffley, for indeed the girl’s manner might have irritated a saint. “But I may tell you *I* find Mrs. Childs a capital worker.”

“That is what everyone says,” returned Abigail, “and you know what everyone says must be true, as the little boy remarked to his grandmother.”

“I am not so sure,” replied Mrs. Jeffley ; “but I was going to observe, when you interrupted me——”

“Yes,” said the girl, as she stopped, “I am so sorry I interrupted you, *if I did*——”

“That,” went on Mrs. Jeffley desperately, “I made Mrs. Childs an excuse for coming here.”

“Why ?” asked Miss Weir.

"Because I wanted to see you."

The girl laughed outright.

"There was no excuse needed," she said.

"I am nearly always on view."

"I couldn't know that."

"But *why* did you want to see me?" inquired Abigail.

"Because I have been hearing so much about you lately."

"Won't you sit down, Mrs. Jeffley? I do hope you will be able to spare time to tell me all you have heard."

"Well, I heard, for one thing," returned Mrs. Jeffley, "that you were a very pretty girl."

"It is not for me to contradict that," said Abigail thoughtfully, breaking off another length of thread, "and I won't ask you for your opinion, since I don't know," she added, with a roguish twinkle, "that I much care for being flattered to my face."

"I should not do that," replied Mrs. Jeffley.

"No, I am sure you would not," returned the girl.

"And I heard also," proceeded Mrs. Jeffley, "about how clever you are."

“That must have come from Mrs. Childs, yet I wonder she is only discovering my good qualities now.”

Mrs. Jeffley made no answer. Already she had committed herself sufficiently.

“What an industrious girl you seem to be!” she said.

“Oh! very,” agreed Abigail.

“Now I wonder——” began Mrs. Jeffley, and then she stopped.

“What do you wonder?” asked Miss Weir.

“Whether you would feel offended if I asked you to do some needlework for *me*?”

“Quite the reverse—should be glad.”

“Well—*will* you do some?”

“If I can—what is it?”

“Children’s clothes; you can make them, I feel confident.”

“Yes, I can make them, I dare say.”

“Will you send round for the work, then?”

“No, I will come—there is no one here to send.”

“Do you mean to tell me really you live in this huge barrack of a place all alone?”

"You forget Mr. Brisco lives here too—you came to see him, you know."

"What a take-off you are!" retorted Mrs. Jeffley, a little peevishly. "I have said I came to see you and you only; and I am very glad I did come, for I hope I shall see a great deal of you."

"You will, if you can give me plenty of work and I am able to do it to please you," said Abigail.

"You will be able to please me, I have little doubt. Are you not dreadfully dull here?"

"Dull! not in the least. I always find plenty to do, and besides, in the day-time people are coming and going. Of course this is not a fair sample. On Whit-Tuesday there is scarcely anything doing."

"One of my lodgers has offices here, has he not?" said Mrs. Jeffley, unconsciously following the example set by the daughter of a publisher and editor who, being asked at a party who a lady was, languidly replied, "One of my papa's contributors."

"I do not know any of your lodgers who can have an office here, except Mr. Katzen,"

answered Miss Weir, with pitiless directness.

"Is it Mr. Katzen you mean?"

"Yes, Mr. Katzen, the Consul for New Andalusia."

"He is going to leave us."

"I suppose you are very sorry."

"Mr. Brisco is; for myself, I feel if the change be for Mr. Katzen's good I ought not to repine."

"That is a very pretty sentiment."

"And a very proper one too;" and Abigail, having finished the little pinafore she was making, laid it flat on the table and began to fold it up.

"What a clever man Mr. Katzen is!" said Mrs. Jeffley.

"So Mr. Brisco says."

"And so very kind."

"I never heard Mr. Brisco say anything about *that*."

"He is a most generous person."

"So he has often told me, and *he* ought to know;" and then Miss Weir looked up archly at Mrs. Jeffley and laughed, and Mrs. Jeffley looked at Miss Weir and laughed too.

Why she did so it would be hard to say,

except perhaps because she felt the date of Mr. Katzen's departure from Fowkes' Buildings would not be speedily fixed.

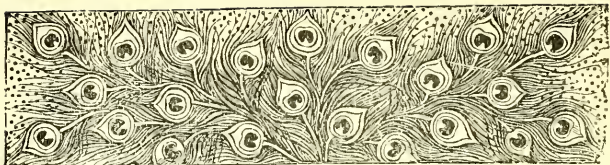
"Well, I must be going," she said at last. "I shall look up some work for you at once. When can you come round?"

"To-morrow," was the prompt rejoinder.

"Between eleven and twelve? Will that suit you?"

"Yes, I will make it suit me," answered the girl. "I can let you out at the other door, Mrs. Jeffley—it is nearer for you than going round by Botolph Lane."





CHAPTER VII.

MR. KATZEN'S LOVE.

AS Miss Weir closed the door leading into Love Lane, after Mrs. Jeffrey, and turned in order to proceed to her own room, she saw Mr. Katzen, who had entered the house by the front entrance, crossing the hall.

“Have you lost the little pain in your temper which was troubling you yesterday, my love?” he asked.

For answer, Abigail stuck her dimpled impudent chin in the air, and without even bestowing one look on her admirer, walked along the passage leading to the kitchens and offices.

Mr. Katzen sighed audibly, and then went upstairs laughing. That morning his spirits

were remarkably good, and everything—even the conquest of Miss Weir—seemed to him possible.

Half an hour later he paused outside the door of the apartment which served the purpose indiscriminately of workroom, kitchen, parlour, study, and guest-chamber. He stopped and listened—Abigail was singing louder than her canary bird.

“The girl is happy,” he thought, “happy in this wretched house. How does she manage to keep up her spirits?” and then he knocked.

“Come in,” cried out Abigail, in a clear steady voice. “Come in—oh! it is you, is it?” she went on. “Well, Mr. Katzen, and what do you want?”

“I want a chat with the fair Abigail,” he answered.

“Meaning me?”

“Meaning you, and none other. No offence, I hope.”

“No offence has been taken as yet; and if I were you, I would not give any.”

Without waiting for any invitation, he seated himself on a wooden form which stood beside

the hearth. All the furniture was simple, not to say rude ; but everything was scrubbed snowy white, and through the well-cleaned windows bright sunshine poured into a room innocent of dust or motes.

The canary's song had ceased at Mr. Katzen's entrance, like Abby's own, and the bird was now hopping about the room, and occasionally setting its head on one side to survey Miss Weir's visitor.

"What a busy young lady you are !" he said, glancing at the pile of work which lay tidily folded up on the table.

He had known that fact for so long a time, the young lady he addressed did not seem to think comment upon it necessary.

"I do not like to see you working your pretty fingers to the bone," he went on.

Miss Weir lifted her left hand, and regarded it attentively. It was small, dimpled, plump.

"There are no bones visible," she remarked, apparently in a spirit of the calmest criticism.

"No, indeed."

"Considering the amount of work I have done, do you not think they ought to have been showing by this time?"

“ Ah ! my dear, you know that is not what I mean. It is not right for a young girl to drudge and slave as you do.”

“ Why not ?”

“ Because young girls ought to enjoy themselves.”

“ I enjoy myself,” she replied, turning down a hem as she spoke with great vigour and determination ; “ there is nothing I like so much as work.”

“ That is all very well, but it ought to be profitable work.”

“ This is profitable——”

“ Yes—yes—I understand, it may bring you in a few shillings, which you will spend in buying something for a man who scarcely speaks to you.”

“ If I did not spend it on him, on whom should I spend it, pray ?”

“ On your pretty self.”

“ I do spend a great deal on my pretty self.”

“ Fie—fie—Miss Weir, to say that to me, who, sitting even where I am, can see all the darns and patches in your dress !”

“ I am not ashamed of your seeing the patches in my dress.”

“No! though you know it is said—a rent may be accident, but a darn is premeditated poverty.”

“My darns are premeditated poverty then; and as for this gown, it is good enough for indoors. I have a better for Sundays.”

“May I come and see it?”

“You can see it if you like to go to church, but then I suppose you never go to church.”

“I should like to hear one service there with you—not, however, the order for morning prayer.”

“If you mean the solemnization of matrimony, I will tell you when I am going to be married.”

“To me, though—only to me!”

“That is quite another affair,” she said coquettishly.

“But you *will* marry me, Abigail?”

“You have not yet asked me,” she returned, holding a finger to her canary, which immediately availed itself of the offered perch.

Mr. Katzen looked at the girl.

Things were getting on faster than he had intended; but, spite of her poor surroundings,

of all he knew about her past, she seemed captivating with the morning sun streaming upon her lissom figure, her lips a little pursed up as she tweeted to the bird, her long dark lashes brushing the rich tints of her soft cheeks ; and he took her at her word.

"*Will* you marry me?" he asked. Without raising her eyes or turning her head, she answered :

"Certainly not."

"Well, that is civil, I must say," said the new Consul, rising in hot wrath. "Here you, whom I have known since you were a chit of a child——"

"With scarce a shoe to my foot," she prompted, still contemplating her canary.

"Lead me on," he continued—declining her addition to his sentence—"to propose to you—for, though you may not think it, I made an actual proposal which I mean to stand by—and you state, as if I had only asked you if you would have an orange, 'Certainly not.'"

"I never was very civil, I am afraid," she said, looking at him now with a whole world of meaning in the depths of her dark eyes.

"I suppose I ought to have added that I felt very much obliged."

"You are enough to drive a man mad!" he returned. "Are you in jest—or do you think I am?"

"No; I fancy you are in earnest. And nothing was further from my mind than jesting, I assure you."

"In plain English, you really mean you will not marry me?"

"I really will not marry you."

For a moment Mr. Katzen stood silent, gazing at the girl with a sort of sullen intentness.

"I move then," he said at last, with a forced, uneasy laugh, "that we read the Bill this day six months."

"Or six years," amended Miss Weir, "or sixty; time will make no difference on my part."

"We will see," he answered. "How is it you never have a smile or a pleasant word for me? How is it you are willing to do anything for an old man who scarcely knows, and I am sure does not care, whether you are living or dead, while you treat me—*me*,

Karl Katzen, to whom others of your sex have not been so indifferent—as though I were unworthy of your notice.”

“I am sure I can scarcely tell,” she replied. “Perhaps I like Mr. Brisco so much because he does not want to marry me.”

“But why should you not wish to marry me?” he persisted. “The mere prospect of leaving this house—this horrible dead-and-alive house——”

“I am not at all anxious to leave this house,” she interrupted.

“Almost all girls take kindly to their first lover.”

“Do they? Some of them must begin to be fond early, then!”

“That is your case, probably,” he sneered. “No doubt you lost your heart long ago to that young man round the corner.”

“Which corner?” she asked. “Be precise; there are lots of corners about here.”

Her saucy speech restored Mr. Katzen's good temper.

“Come, Abby,” he said, “you and I must not quarrel. Some day you will be sorry for the way you are treating me now.”

I am going to make a great success—I mean to be a millionaire yet. Smooth down your ruffled feathers, and tell me, like my good love, if you would not like to be Baroness von Katzenstein?”

“Not if you were Baron von Katzenstein,” she replied demurely.

“You cannot make me angry with you,” he returned. “I intend you to marry me as soon as I can afford to support a wife in the style I should like my wife to live, and in the meantime I wish to show you what a mild, genial, forgiving person I am.”

“Saul among the prophets!” suggested Miss Weir, threading her needle.

“We know who can quote Scripture,” returned her suitor.

“Mr. Brisco’s opinion is, that the somebody you mean does not quote Scripture.”

“It says in the Bible that he does.”

“Mr. Brisco would be obliged if you could tell him where. As you do not seem to have much to do, you might go over to the Rectory and borrow a ‘Concordance.’”

“You are flippant this morning, Miss Weir.”

"Perhaps that may be because I have had an early visitor."

"What, the new curate! By Heaven! I thought there was something under all this!"

"No, not the new curate."

"Your young man, then, I suppose, from round the corner?"

"No; not a man, young or old, from round the corner or anywhere else. My visitor was your great friend Mrs. Jeffley."

"The deuce she was! And what did Mrs. Jeffley want?"

"Her ostensible errand was to know whether Mrs. Childs still worked here."

"Good Lord! and what did you tell her?"

"I told her Mrs. Childs had not worked here for nearly six years, and that with my goodwill she should never work here again."

"If you have a fault, my Abigail—which, however, I do not assert, remember—it is excessive candour, a candour which at times is almost painful. But proceed, dear girl."

"I do not know that there is much to proceed about."

“ You said Mrs. Jeffley’s ostensible errand was to ask concerning poor, dear, grimy Mrs. Childs. Did she not tell you the nature of her real mission ?”

“ No, she did not tell me at first, but I found that out for myself. She wanted to see *me*.”

“ Vainest of vain young persons ! You think all the world wants to see you. No doubt, though, Mrs. Jeffley admired you very much indeed.”

“ She ought, I am sure ; but I have my misgivings on that point.”

“ May I ask, why these misgivings ?”

“ Well, for one reason, because I am not in the least like Mrs. Jeffley.”

“ I agree with you there. You are not like Mrs. Jeffley—not like what Mrs. Jeffley ever could have been in her best days ; but what of that ?”

“ All, I should say.”

“ But, my sweet darling, my dearest Abigail, my spouse that is to be in the happy future stretching away before us——that is right ; smile—I delight to see your dimples—you ladies do love to look on a pretty face.”

“So far as my experience goes, no lady loves to look on any pretty face but her own.”

The answer delighted Mr. Katzen. He burst into a fit of laughter, this time perfectly natural and spontaneous.

“Your experience, child,” he repeated; “that must be large indeed. It embraces, probably, Mrs. Brown, in Love Lane, and Mrs. Robinson, in St. Mary-at-Hill.”

“To say nothing of Miss Jones, in Botolph Alley,” added Miss Weir pertly. “You forget, however, Mr. Katzen, my experience of life began before I ever entered this house. And even if it had not——”

“Why do you stop, fair maiden?—‘even if it had not——’”

“Supposing you wanted to tell the world all about the nature and habits, say of ants, should you not know their ways and habits as well after you had watched a hundred in their daily life as if you watched a million?”

“The point you wish to express being probably that, having studied the vanity, meanness, and littleness of the female Brown, Jones and Co. of your acquaintance, you

would be competent to write an exhaustive analysis of the characters of Cleopatra or Queen Elizabeth?"

"I should be competent to form an opinion of their weaknesses, at any rate," retorted the girl. "It would be very strange if, living so much alone, I had not thought a great deal about many subjects concerning which most people never trouble their heads, and I have come to the conclusion that vanity is as strong a failing among women as jealousy among men."

"God help your foolish, innocent little heart!" said Mr. Katzen; "men are never jealous."

"Oh, aren't they?" scoffed Abigail.

"I mean in a general way, of course. There are and must be cases where even the instinct of self-preservation induces a certain amount of perfectly righteous jealousy in a man's bosom."

"I was not talking about any case of that sort," said Miss Weir calmly, as though she had spent her whole life in the practice of the Divorce Court.

"What were you talking about then,

dearest — though not wisest — of dear girls ?”

“ About men being jealous of each other, for what I should call nothing. If anyone of you gets on, makes a name, makes a fortune, marries a rich wife or a beauty, buys a handsome horse, starts a drag, sets up a carriage, immediately every man he knows grows wildly jealous. I have seen,” finished Abby, sapiently shaking her head, “ quite enough to know that.”

“ Really, to be scarce seventeen, you are wonderfully cynical, young lady. I wonder if any man is jealous of me ;” and he looked sharply at the girl, upon whose figure the sunlight was streaming at the moment in a golden flood.

“ You will soon be able to tell that now,” returned Abigail, with the most guileless expression on her face.

“ Why, in Heaven’s name, should I soon be able to tell that now ?”

“ Because you are getting so prosperous. You are Consul in England for—what is the name of that outlandish place ? You are going to make a fortune ; then you will buy

a title ; then you will fit yourself up a castle on the Rhine or in Spain—it does not much matter which ; then you will get a cab to take away your luggage from Fowkes' Buildings, and leave poor Mrs. Jeffley broken-hearted.”

“And the same morning I will marry Abigail Weir.”

“I forgot that ; and then all the City gallants who have been blocking Botolph Lane for years past, and insisting upon my smiling on them, will want to cut your throat.”

“It is not always safe, my dear, to make what you call fun of a man who is in earnest.”

“Did I ever say you were not in earnest, Mr. Katzen ? On the contrary, I believe, as a rule, you are almost as serious as Mr. Brisco.”

“He, at all events, is a person scarcely likely to excite envy.”

“Except on the grounds of being so clever.”

“Do you know, Abby, it just occurs to me you are in love with your benefactor.”

“Perhaps I am ; there is no just cause or impediment, is there ?”

“None that I know of; but it might be prudent for you to make a few inquiries into his past history before taking him for better or worse. For aught you can tell, he may have a wife already——”

“Or a dozen.”

“No need for a dozen; you will find one a sufficient barrier.”

“Quite a mistake, Mr. Katzen. One might die—be poisoned, for example; but how could any person poison a dozen?” And the girl looked up mischievously, and then resumed her stitching.

There was a pause—the canary, which had fluttered up to its mistress’ shoulder, considering a convenient moment had arrived for favouring the company, suddenly burst into song. For a little while there was no sound save that of flutelike shakes and silver trilling roulades. Sunshine still streamed down on Abby’s figure; her busy needle glinted in and out. Mr. Katzen, soothed by the silence and the picture of quiet domesticity, held his peace for a time; but at length he broke the spell by saying:

“And so you do not think that Mrs. Jeffley admired you?”

“She admires you, which is much more to the purpose,” answered Miss Weir.

“I always believed Mrs. Jeffley to be a lady possessed of a most excellent judgment, and now I know my belief was right.”

“Happy Mrs. Jeffley!”

“May I ask, dear Abigail, how happy Mrs. Jeffley impressed you?”

“I don’t think she is a bad sort of person. She promised to give me plenty of work;” and Mr. Katzen’s dear Abigail broke a length of cotton off her spool and threaded her needle afresh.

“And you said ‘Thank you,’ I suppose, and hoped you would give satisfaction?”

“Of course! Why should I not? If I give satisfaction I can get work, and the more work I am able to get the better I am pleased.”

With a smothered exclamation, Mr. Katzen rose from his bench and paced the room.

“When will you learn not to make yourself so cheap?” he asked.

“What has happened?” returned the girl.

“Nothing special has come to *me* during the last week. *I* have not been made consul anywhere. I must go on sewing just as if there were not such a place on earth as New Andalusia.”

“You need not,” he said. “Only speak the word, and I will take you away from this miserable life—from this grinding drudgery.”

“Time enough to talk of all that when you have made your fortune,” answered Miss Weir, in a tone which implied she considered such a period likely to be somewhat remote.

“Do you know, there are moods of yours which make me feel as if I should like to beat you.”

For a second Miss Weir suspended her employment, and looked at her lover.

“In some countries, I have read,” she said, “that is the approved mode of courtship; in England, however, the custom is different. So you had better wait till I am Mrs. Katzen before adopting such a form of endearment.”

Again he broke into laughter; partly because he felt relieved she had not quite taken

him at his word, greatly because this especial sort of badinage possesses for many men an inexplicable charm.

“What a funny girl you are!” he exclaimed. “One never knows how to take you;” and then, still stitching away, she laughed too, while the canary excelled all previous efforts in the way of melody.

“You seem”—at this juncture interposed a thin, sarcastic voice—“to be particularly merry here. I hope I don’t intrude.”

“On the contrary,” said Mr. Katzen, rising and holding out his hand in greeting to Mr. Brisco. “I have been waiting your return, and Miss Weir has kindly enlivened the time by airing some quite original views concerning marriage.”

“Concerning marriage—humph! Will you kindly walk into my office for a few minutes, Mr. Katzen,” he went on, “if you want to speak to me?”

As they passed out together, the pity she so often felt for the friendless, desolate man stirred Abby’s young heart to its very depths. Something in his worn face and wasted figure—some suggested contrast between Mr. Kat-

zen, confident of success, and her benefactor, poor, struggling, lonely—stung her like the cut of a whip, and running after them, she said to Mr. Brisco :

“ You won’t go out again without having something to eat ? Dinner is quite ready.”

For a moment he looked at her in surprise. Her manner was so earnest.

“ Promise me,” she persisted. “ You know, when you fast from morning till night you are always ill.”

“ I promise then,” he answered ; but he spoke the words reluctantly.

“ She is right,” said Mr. Katzen, as the girl left them. “ It is not well to go for many hours without food. What a strange child she is !”

“ Most strange,” agreed Mr. Brisco, “ to devote her life to one against whom Fate has such a spite.”

“ I don’t know that exactly,” dissented Mr. Katzen. “ She owes so much to you, that it would be strange indeed were she not grateful.”

“ She owes so little to me,” returned Mr. Brisco, “ that I wonder she is grateful at all.”

“ I have but to repeat, it would be odd if she were not grateful. You had better make as much of her as you can while she is with you.”

“ While she is with me?—what do you mean? Where is she going?”

“ She will go the way of all women,” laughed Mr. Katzen. “ Do you suppose you will be able to keep her for ever? Do you think young men are blind? It is all very well for us to talk of her as a child; but you may be wise, Mr. Brisco, to notice she has shot up into a girl—a pretty girl, a precocious girl—who has got it in her to go very far wrong as well as very far right.”

“ I never thought of her marrying,” said Mr. Brisco; “ such an idea never entered my mind, save perhaps as a remote contingency—at some distant time. Have you any reason to think——”

“ No—not I,” answered Mr. Katzen as the other paused, leaving his interrogatory unspoken; “ but when I see a good-looking girl, the conclusion is not hard to draw that other people may see she is good-looking too.”

Half an hour passed slowly by. The canary was still singing, Abby still sewing, the dinner still simmering on the hob—and still Mr. Brisco did not put in an appearance.

At the end of that time the girl rose, lifted the lid of the saucepan, shook her head doubtfully, and began to lay the cloth.

She made as much noise as she could with plates, forks, and spoons, and often paused in her task to listen for the opening of a door.

At length she heard one open and shut.

“He will be here presently, pretty Dick,” she confided to her bird, and then, looking round, she beheld Mr. Katzen once again.

“So you’ve made up your mind to go at last,” she said. “I thought perhaps you were intending to stop all day.”

“Such pleasure is not for a poor drudge like me. Good-bye, my darling love,” and he threw a kiss towards her; “farewell for the present, Baroness von Katzenstein.”

“Good-day, Duke of Rhineland,” retorted Miss Weir. “You have spoiled our dinner. Do go before you spoil my temper too!”

“Ah! my God, that would be a misfortune!” he remarked, and went his way.



CHAPTER VIII.

SUNDAY.

ROUND and about the old house in Botolph Lane churches lie thick as leaves in autumn.

And with few exceptions autumn leaves could scarce seem more sere and dead than they. Here and there some notable preacher or well-trained choir attracts a congregation, but as a rule the old citizens mouldering to dust are not more lifeless than the weekly services attended by some dozen adults and the school-children.

And all the while there is a great multitude waiting without, willing to answer if only called in some intelligible language—a mighty multitude that would fill the now empty seats to overflowing—a restless and curious multi-

tude it may be, like the Athenians, over-fond of novelty, yet owning souls to be saved, and minds to be filled, and hearts to be satisfied.

Empty as most of the City churches are now, they were emptier in the days when Mrs. Jeffley kept her lodging-house in Fowkes' Buildings.

Plenty of choice and to spare had her captains and mates and other residents in the matter of pews and spiritual refreshment. Some went here, some there, some nowhere. Each Sunday morning regularly Mr. Jeffley repaired to All Hallows, Barking. It was an easy distance, just across the street; but Mrs. Jeffley was never able to manage the walk.

She had something else to do, she said, than go to church; she wondered "Jack could be so absurd as to suppose it was possible for her to leave the house. If he were like anybody else, he would know she could not go out while there was an early dinner to cook for so many people."

"But you do not cook it," ventured Mr. Jeffley, on one occasion.

“That has nothing to do with the matter,” retorted Mrs. Jeffley. “Who’d see to things, I’d be glad to know, if I was like some women, thinking of myself and going to church and the theatres, and all sorts of amusements? There are wives so situated they can leave their houses without everything going to wreck and ruin, but I am not one of them. I only wish I was. It is not from choice I stop moping indoors; but there! what is the good of talking? As you are of no use at home, do take the children out of my way.”

Which Mr. Jeffley was wont to do, nothing loth, though he would have preferred conducting his progeny to church more suitably attired. A plain man himself, flowers, feathers, and finery seemed to his mind out of place in the severe dignity of All Hallows, Barking.

Having, however, found remonstrance of no avail, honest Jack resigned himself to this dispensation as he had to others. It was not his way to quarrel. The soft answer which is usually supposed to turn away wrath, was that in which he most excelled, and if he

sometimes carried a sore heart with him into the house of God, at least he never took there the memoy of any bitter word he could have wished to recall.

Often Frank Scott, who generally accompanied him to the square pew where the children sat well in evidence, would, remembering the fray which usually preceded poor Mr. Jeffley's dismissal to public worship, involuntarily edge a little closer to his friend.

No sentence had ever passed between them concerning the perfections or imperfections of the self-styled best of wives; but Frank Scott knew Jack understood his silence meant no absence of sympathy, and Jack mentally thanked Frank for that silence more than he would have thanked any man for speech.

When once the dinner, 'on which Mrs. Jeffley found it necessary to concentrate all the strength of her intellect, was over, the members of the establishment were free to do whatever seemed best to them. After that stupendous culinary effort Mrs. Jeffley felt her hands were free.

“Tea will be ready at half-past five,” she was wont to say, “for any person who wants it.” As a rule, very few did want it, grog being a beverage much more to the taste of Mrs. Jeffley’s seafaring friends than Congou. Supper was laid at nine—cold always.

Each individual has his own way of keeping the Christian Sabbath holy. Mrs. Jeffley kept it with cold meat, salad, and pickles.

“There is never any cooking in my house,” she frequently declared, “on Sundays after two o’clock dinner; other people can do as they like, of course, but I am not going to have chops and steaks and kidneys grilling from morning till night on Sundays for anybody.”

Water for internal use was the only thing to be found hot in Mrs. Jeffley’s domain after the hour she mentioned, but of it a generous supply was provided.

Those who remained at home, and those who passed the evening out, alike seemed to require quantities of that innocent fluid.

“Pah!” said Mr. Katzen. “On Sunday night the house reeks of rum and whisky;”

and he might have added of tobacco as well, and afterwards inserted an addendum to the effect that it reeked every night in like manner.

So long as Jack “took himself out” of his wife’s way, she cared very little where he spent the hours after his dinner on Sunday.

Usually he went a few miles into the country to see some farmer friend, taking one or more of the children with him.

Mr. Katzen had friends likewise, though unconnected with agriculture; and when he did not visit them he was wont, weather and season permitting, to stroll into Hyde Park and picture to himself the time when he too would have his equipage—his coachman, his footman, and pair of chestnuts.

On the Sunday following that Whitsuntide, when what he mentally styled “a great piece of luck” came to him, some vague idea of repairing to morning service and seeing Abby in her best bib and tucker crossed his mind; but he refrained—first, because he had not a notion which church Miss Weir attended; and second, because though flirting with and even offering to marry her under the rose

was one thing, appearing in public as her lover seemed quite another. He meant no wrong by the girl; if he had, he was aware it would have been of no use; and in any case, though not a man timid of consequences, he knew the storm, in such event certain to ensue, might be dangerous.

But what he called his heart did not hold any evil intention towards Abby. As a friend, as a comrade, as a wife, he felt she would suit him to perfection, but Abby betrayed seemed quite another matter.

"I shouldn't care to be the man," he considered; "and yet girls as high-spirited as she have, without any great amount of persuasion either, trodden the downward path and proved meek enough at the bottom."

With a feeling almost of dread, Mr. Katzen turned from the picture himself had drawn.

"What can that old fool be thinking of?" he considered, "to leave her alone as he does? She might get into any mischief and he be not a bit the wiser. When I give up my office, who will be on the spot to know who comes and who goes? It is necessary for thee to get rich, my Karl, and remove

her from temptation ; but till I am a little firmer I must not go too fast, I must refrain from spending time with my pretty vixen. And she also, she will like me the better when she sees that, after all, a man's whole world is not bounded by the light in a woman's eyes. My faith, neither is it ! If there were not a woman on earth, plenty of things would remain worth striving for—and money can buy them. That is so, my Karl ; money friend, money—the root of all evil, the root of all good !”

As if in support of his theory, Miss Weir did on that especial Trinity Sunday morning, when she entered church, give one swift glance round as if searching for an expected face. She was adorned in youth ; a pretty coquettish bonnet, small, and of a shape just then in vogue. Her dress, of some cheap effective material, fitted her to perfection. Everything about her was trim, and what anyone of Mrs. Jeffley's admirers might truly have called “taut”—no flying ribbons, or waving plumes, or ends of lace. The set of her gown, the fit of her boots and gloves, reminded one of a Frenchwoman ; but she

was fresh and bright and wholesome, and good to look upon, as though that moment come out of some great English country-house. There might be much in her lot, and something in her cruel past, a good mother could have wished different, but there was nothing in her face.

Across it sunshine and shadow were for ever playing at hide-and-seek. Now the eyes were dancing with amusement and smiles that showed cunning dimples in the cheeks, and made any male onlooker believe the girl could never seem prettier than when full of fun, nearly rippling over into laughter.

But when she was serious—when sad or grave or sorry—there arose out of the depths of her nature an expression which gave to every feature a beauty hitherto lacking. It seemed as though at such times it was her real soul which looked out of the window of her eyes—the spirit known only to God—which for a brief instant made itself dimly perceived. Then, as through a veil darkly, there could be caught a glimpse of a nature able to bear, not merely patiently, but cheer-

fully, such loneliness and deprivation and hardship as fall to the lot of few.

Out of the unlikeliest materials she had built a palace of content. In her life, as in the room where she spent most of her solitary hours, there was nothing the world would have accounted beautiful or desirable, yet she so set out and decked her existence, just as she did the few articles her apartment contained, that she ended by making believe she had everything at command the heart of woman need desire to render her happy.

Pass out from some great house where you have seen the children of rich people—pale and peevish, tired of luxury, weary of their toys, disgusted by the very profusion of gifts they have received—and, wandering into the nearest street in which Poverty dwells, ask yourself whether even in this world there is no compensation for the poor? Behold yon group of happy, grimy little girls gathered round the proud possessor of that old, filthy, battered wooden doll, which has met with every casualty possible to its species. It has lain among the cinders—it has been thrust between the bars of the grate—it has been

flung against brick walls by rude boys, and got its nose battered—it has not as much hair on its pate as could suffice to split a cane ; yet it remains beautiful to the imagination of its followers. It is hugged to sleep in the arms of some tiny child scarce less ugly, and quite as dirty as itself. Or view this group of young persons, not one of whose ages exceeds five years. They are kneeling or squatting on the pavement—which can make their garments no grimier than before—engaged in the entrancing occupation of making a mud pie. They are as filthy as the pie, but that adds to the pleasure of their lives. They know at any moment a shrill voice, followed by the possessor of a strong hand, may come to interrupt their joy ; but they catch the fleeting moments—the very incertitude intensifies their rapture.

The upshot of all of which is, that they who have the least enjoy it the most ; that the mind can spread a feast out of the humblest viands : that for the benefit of those of low estate and of no account, miracles, which to the rich might well seem tantamount to the marvel of five thousand

being fed on five barley-loaves and two small fishes, are daily repeated.

For Abigail Weir most certainly they were. In the time which ensued after she sought and found a shelter in Botolph Lane, she had not even the semblance of a wooden doll wherewith, like other children, to play at mother, nurse, schoolmistress, aunt and sister; but she made her own play for herself. The very stones of the courtyard seemed capable of providing the poor waif with amusement. The old house—with its leads, its long passages, its steep back-stairs, its brewhouse, its inlaid circles on the drawing-room chimney-piece, its marble hearths, its wainscots, its panelling—was to her a kingdom, the resources of which seemed inexhaustible.

The moment she grew strong enough to stand on her poor thin little legs she began to sing, and then to try to be useful. Since those days the years had passed, and she was, as Mr. Katzen truthfully said, a child “not any more,” but she was merry and helpful still.

On that Trinity Sunday, the few persons

who were in church knew and spoke to her. She was a stray, friendless and desolate no longer, but a bright, pretty girl, who, having worked hard for six days, always looked forward to the beginning of a week as the happiest of happy seasons.

She had left the dinner cooking itself, and on her return home served it almost immediately. It was a simple meal, as simple almost as meal could be ; yet Mr. Brisco declared such an expenditure could not possibly continue.

“ Put any money you have to spare in the savings-bank,” he said almost harshly ; “ but don’t spend it on luxurious meals. You will want it all some day. Supposing anything were to happen to me, and you were forced to turn out of here, how would you pay, even for lodgings, if you did not possess a sixpence between you and starvation ? ”

“ I don’t mean anything to happen to you,” she answered ; “ but if anything did happen,” she went on, recognising the evil mood which held possession of Mr. Brisco, “ we know who tempers the wind to the shorn lamb. Was not I a shorn lamb when

I came here? and only think what a warm fold I have lain snug in ever since!"

As she spoke, she laid her hand impulsively on Mr. Brisco's arm.

With distressing promptitude he removed and gave it back to her again. He was wont thus to repress any approach to familiarity. If he did not say in so many words that such demonstrations were unpleasant to him, he told her the fact by actions which were unmistakable. They had lived together during years, yet though the girl loved him with all her heart, they were scarcely nearer than the first night they met.

Mr. Brisco barely tasted the frugal dinner, and before Abigail had finished her meal he took his hat and went out. Shortly after his departure, Miss Weir also emerged from the gloom of the house, so old, so changed, so lonely, so forlorn, into the bright sunshine which bathed Tower Street, as if in a sea of molten gold.



CHAPTER IX.

LESS THAN KIN.

IN the very heart of the City there are on Sunday walks to be found as quiet and as desolate as though Cheapside were Box Hill, or Lombard Street Salisbury Plain.

From Ironmonger Lane to St. Martin's-le-Grand anyone may thread his way through passages where scarce a creature is to be encountered, and if he likes to continue his peregrinations, he can by a series of similar courts and alleys get in equal silence to Basinghall Street.

It was this precise route Abigail Weir followed in the calm stillness of that glorious afternoon.

In some of the churches service was again

in progress, and every now and then a burst of psalmody or a long-drawn-out "Amen" rent for a moment the heavy cloud of calm stillness which hung over the great City.

Slowly the girl paced the narrow passages, not alone. At a glance it might have been seen she was accustomed thus to walk frequently, for between herself and her companion there evidently existed such an amount of intimacy as rendered constant conversation superfluous.

Abigail looked very sweet. Her heart was full, and the tender light of a sorrowful and infinite compassion lay softly upon her young face. The man—naturally it was a man who kept step with her, shortening his own strides in order to do so—from time to time stole a glance at her. Something had vexed her, and he scarcely cared to ask what it was. Friends, however, cannot long keep silence under such circumstances, and at length he asked tentatively :

"What *are* you thinking of, Abby? What is the worry?"

She looked up at him with a suspicion of tears in those eyes which, though in no sense

“fine,” were after all, this man felt, the dearest, truest eyes friend or lover could wish to meet.

“Worth all the browns and blacks and blues ever painted or sung,” thought this mad adorer, forgetful of the thousand shades and shapes each of those despised colours can assume.

“There is no worry,” answered Abby. “I was thinking of Mr. Brisco.”

“You are always thinking of him,” said the young man—he was young—a little reproachfully.

“Not always, though very often,” amended the girl.

“If he were your father he could not be more constantly in your mind.”

“If he were my father I should not fret about him as I do.”

“Why not?”

“Because in that case he would surely let me do something he will not now.”

“What something?”

“Let me show that I am fond of him,” she said softly, and then her full heart could contain itself no longer, and she poured her trouble into sympathetic ears.

“It was not what *you* would account a nice dinner,” she went on, “but I had taken pains to get something I thought he would like—and—and—it seems stupid, but——” she broke off abruptly, and then added, “I wish—I wish I knew how I could please him. I do try hard.”

“Don’t you know, Abby,” said the young man, “there are some persons so unfortunately constituted that they cannot be pleased, who, unhappy themselves, make everyone else unhappy? I am afraid this is the case with Mr. Brisco.”

“No, the fault is in myself; perhaps I am too anxious, or perhaps he cannot forget what a forlorn, wretched creature I was when I skulked into his house like a starved cat.”

“Why *do* you talk of the past?”

“I cannot tell, unless because it has been so present with me lately. This is not winter, or a cold day, is it? and yet, do you know, I can feel the cruel icy chill of that night now as I walk. There was a time when I had almost forgotten it; but the memory of my degraded childhood has been growing stronger and stronger ever since I

came to know you. I wonder how it happens."

The listener thought he understood very well how it happened; but he remained silent.

"What would have become of me," went on the girl, "if I had not happened to turn in under the archway? And oh! what a fright it gave me, to hear the gate shut before I could creep away again! I shall never forget wandering round the courtyard and peeping out of the cold and darkness into the old house. I thought no palace could be more beautiful, and then at last came that one night—I slipped in, and popped down into the cellar while the men were busy taking the last of the office furniture through the other door; but I have told you all this before," she sighed.

"Yes, and I never want to hear a word about it again. Poor Abby, you must have spent many a wretched day in the house since that night."

"No—after I knew I should be allowed to stop I was never unhappy. The life was heaven, after what I had gone through; and

now I haven't a care in the world except the one—that I cannot make Mr. Brisco's lot brighter. If I could only see a different look in his worn face! I wish some one would leave him a fortune—a great fortune. I wonder how it happens he is so poor?"

"Many people—most people are poor," was the answer.

"Ah! but not such people as Mr. Brisco. I cannot tell you how clever he is! When I am alone I often fall a-dreaming about him, and I sometimes dream—do not laugh at me—that something must have gone all wrong in his life when he was as young as you, perhaps. A man can get a limb broken—why can't a life be broken too?"

"How absurd you are, Abby!"

"No, I am not. Now and then, when he has been walking about at night, I have heard words I could not help hearing. Frank," she broke off to say, "I want to tell you something I have never told to anyone."

"Do not tell it to me," he said, "if it is something Mr. Brisco would not care to have repeated."

"I *shall* tell it to you—at least, there are

two things instead of one. I must go back to the time when I went to the old house—you know what a tiny atom I was?”

He nodded.

“I was stunted, and so thin you might have seen through me if you held me up between you and the light—I was a complete scarecrow, a bundle of rags and tatters—I had not clothing enough to keep out the cold—and it was a piercing, piercing winter.”

“Oh! my dear, why *will* you speak about those cruel days?”

“Because it is part of my story. Well, the first morning Mr. Brisco saw me—for I kept as much as I could out of his way—I was shaking both with fright and cold.

“‘What’s the matter with you, child?’ he asked. I tried to answer him, but I could not, so he went away, and after a little while returned with an old jacket in his hand, and said, ‘Slip that on; it will keep you warm.’

“‘It is a boy’s jacket,’ I answered, not meaning at all to offend him, but just because I felt surprised.

“‘Whether it is or not is no business of

yours,' he told me, quite in a pet. 'Put it on and stop shivering.'

He spoke so roughly, and seemed so vexed, I cried and begged his pardon ; but he went out of the room and banged the door behind him."

"And did you wear the jacket?"

"Yes, till it fell to tatters—it was moth-eaten when he gave it to me ; but while it held together it kept me beautifully warm. Well, that is the first thing. The next is this : a long time afterwards, when I was moving some old boxes in his room to get the dust from behind them, I found that the lid of one came up in my hand ; it was locked, but the hinges had given from the wood. In a moment the room seemed to be filled with a smell like the scent of dead roses and dried lavender, and spices and old coffins. I just peeped in ; I could not resist doing that. The box was piled full of women's clothes—dresses and linen, and lace and ribbons. I wonder who the 'she' was that owned them. I'd have given anything to rummage to the bottom of those things packed maybe before I was born."

“But you did not, dear. I am sure you did not.”

“No; I shut down the lid again, and pushed the box back in its place. Well, and more than that, I have often heard Mr. Brisco at night muttering about some one called Faith: Faith may have been his sister or his wife. He does not look, though, as if he had ever been married; does he?”

“How do people look when they are married?” asked the young man with a smile which was not mirthful.

“I scarcely know; but not like Mr. Brisco, at any rate.”

“Certainly,” answered the young man; “I never before saw a man who seemed so utterly lonely and miserable.”

“He is indeed most lonely,” agreed the girl sadly. “He keeps me at arm’s length; yet,” she added, brightening up a little, “I think he speaks to me oftener than he used. Once or thrice he has asked me what I am making; and though he did speak so sharply to me this afternoon, still on Friday, after looking me over in his strange way, he said, ‘Why, you are growing quite a woman!’”

“He is right ; so you are. Did he add anything after that original remark ?”

“Yes.” But Miss Weir did not explain its nature.

“What was it ? Come, Abby, you need not be so stiff with me.”

“Only——” and she stopped and blushed, even while she laughed.

“Only—that is nothing : finish your sentence.”

“He said,” and her blush deepened, “ ‘ Don’t let the young men make a fool of you.’ ”

“Excellent advice—excellent as terse. And you, Abby ?”

“I told him I would take very good care no man, old or young, made a fool of me.”

“And what did he answer ?”

“That he believed it would require some trouble ; but I must remember, the race was not always to the swift, or the battle to the strong ; and that, sharp though I was, I might meet with some one cleverer than myself.”

“He did not offer you the benefit of his experience, should you ever feel you stood in need of it ?”

“No ; that was all he said. He was crossing the hall when he stopped to speak, and he went out of the house when he had finished.”

“And you sat down to ponder over his words?”

“I did no such thing. I went to Aldgate to buy this bonnet-shape.”

“With which to make a fool of some man,” suggested her friend.

“Perhaps so—perhaps not,” she answered, with a little toss of her head. “But,” she quickly added, “I won’t try to make a fool of you!”

It may be that the minx knew she had done that already. She must, indeed, have been dense not to understand the whole of Frank Scott’s heart was given to her. In his simplicity he believed she could have no knowledge of the fact. He saw nothing but trouble which could come of it for many a long day, and with chivalrous unselfishness he desired to bear that trouble alone. It was through no fault of hers, or folly of his, he chanced to fall in love with the girl. All their intercourse had been conducted on

principles of the strictest friendship. He was a lonely waif, she as lonely a stray : he earned his living hardly, so did she ; he wanted some one to talk to, that proved to be her case precisely ; he had no sister, she no brother. Heaven evidently must have destined each to be brother, sister, to the other. Mr. Scott had arrived in London without knowing a soul in the length or breadth of that hospitable city ; and the very evening of his arrival he met with a stranger who afterwards proved kind as any relative. Miss Weir had lived all her life in London, and knowing a great many people she wished to avoid, she found herself one night, after numberless odd and unpleasant experiences, an inmate of a house where she was not in the least expected or wanted. After she and Mr. Scott had been acquainted for a short time, she told the young man almost everything about herself, and felt relieved to find he was not so much shocked by the story as might have been expected.

“ You must always look and count upon me as if I were your brother,” he said, and

not to seem proud or disagreeable, Miss Weir answered that she would.

When this pact was first entered into, the young lady had, as nearly as she could say, without possessing any baptismal certificate or memory of merry birthdays to which to refer the important question, turned her sixteenth year, while Mr. Frank Scott was, he knew, over twenty-one, and in those days he seemed to Abigail very old indeed. Each time they met, however—and they met often—the disparity appeared to lessen. Miss Weir had been privileged to see a great deal of life, and, as she herself obligingly stated, she was not one to go through the world with her eyes shut. On the one occasion when Abigail repeated Mr. Brisco's remark, the pair had known each other for a space of nearly twelve months, and yet no one was aware of the fact.

The girl had sense enough to keep silence to her many acquaintances; the young man did not know any person in whose ear he would have cared to whisper the secret. At intervals his conscience pricked him when he looked at Mr. Jeffley, but he knew if he told

Jack, Jack would tell his wife, and Mrs. Jeffley would tell the parish; for which excellent reason he held his peace, and still, only of course in a friendly way, managed pretty frequently to see Miss Weir, who was a law to herself, and whose time, unlike Mr. Scott's, was pretty nearly at her own disposal.

"Frank," she began maliciously, after a short pause, "*you* would never try to make a fool of *me*, would you?"

"Why should you ask such a question?" he retorted a little sharply. "How could I if I would?"

"I do not know," she said; "only I have been wondering whether Mr. Brisco had you in his mind when he spoke; whether he could have seen me with you."

"Good heavens! I hope not," exclaimed Frank.

"Why should you hope not?" she inquired.

"Because—because—I don't suppose he would be pleased to see you with any one, more especially with such a poor out-at-elbows chap as I am."

"You can't be poorer than he is."

“All the more reason why he would object to your knowing me.”

“I can’t see that.”

“Well, I can. Here we are in Houndsditch. I must leave you now, Abby, I’m afraid. Good-bye.”

“Good-bye,” she answered.

And for the first time there was a touch of constraint, almost of sadness, in her tone.

“What is the matter with you, dear?” he said, holding her hand.

“Nothing—that is, I don’t know. We had better not stand here. Some one may pass—and——”

With a sigh the young man released her hand, and, waiting only to watch her retreating figure disappear down St. Mary Axe, turned his face towards Aldgate.





CHAPTER X.

MRS. CHILDS' THEORY.

NOMINALLY Mrs. Jeffley was the mistress of her own house and actions: certainly she was master, because Jack counted as nobody; nevertheless, it is a fact that she felt afraid to tell Mrs. Childs she had not merely made Miss Weir's acquaintance, but extended patronage to that unworthy young person.

Mrs. Childs had no right to dictate what, or what not her employer should do. She was accustomed to earn her weekly wage in dirt and outward submission inside Fowkes' Buildings. She never advanced the absurd theory that her body, much less her soul, was her own property. She always appeared fit and ready to do everything; she "knew

better" than to refuse to do anything from the first hour Mrs. Jeffley and she "came to terms." She was that lady's slave, drudge, and echo; but still, had she been a severe schoolmistress, and the bustling Maria a child secretly guilty of some grave disobedience, the latter could not have looked forward to the hour of disclosure with greater disquietude.

She knew that hour must come, no matter with what care and cunning she might try to retard its striking. She adopted all sorts of little expedients—such as naming special hours; contriving herself to be in the way when Abigail was expected; keeping Mrs. Childs out of sight and hearing till the danger for the day had passed; calling herself in Botolph Lane; and on one occasion even chartering a lad to carry back a parcel of finished work for her rather than allow Abigail to bring it.

Spite of all precautions, however, the acquaintance was not a month old before Miss Weir and Mrs. Childs met face to face. They did not speak, of course. Miss Weir passed into the hall with a calm indifference

practice had rendered perfect. Mrs. Childs stepped out from the hall with an air of what would have been haughty contempt, but for the misfortune that the sight of "Missy dressed out in cool muslin and impudence" marred the effect of what might have been a fine situation.

"You saw Mrs. Childs, I suppose, as you came in?" said Mrs. Jeffley to Miss Weir, when they were both seated in Jack's own parlour.

She put the sentence as a question, though indeed she knew perfectly well the encounter must have taken place.

"Oh yes—I saw her," answered Abigail.

"Do you not think she looks a great deal better than she used?"

"It did not strike me."

Now this, had Miss Weir only known it, seemed to Mrs. Jeffley a very cruel blow. She was so accustomed to hear Mrs. Childs—a woman who could not have been fattened had anyone cooped her—speak as though, since her translation from Botolph Lane to the heaven of Fowkes' Buildings, she could only be regarded as a female Daniel Lam-

bert, that Abigail's lack of perception as to the improvement in the worthy woman's physical condition struck her as singularly unkind.

"I assure you," said Mrs. Jeffley with eager earnestness, "since she came to me she is quite another person; she acknowledges that herself."

"You could not have the statement on better authority," answered Miss Weir drily.

"At any rate, she ought to be strong," went on Mrs. Jeffley. "She lives well enough here."

"I have no doubt of *that!*" agreed the girl, as though there had been something else she did doubt.

Mrs. Jeffley, finding that the subject of her charwoman's charms failed to excite the keen interest it should have done in Miss Weir's breast, began to turn over the "little things," just completed by that clever young lady, with an appearance of great attention.

"You are a treasure!" she said at last. "I cannot express how much obliged I feel to you."

"The obligation is quite as much on my side," answered Abigail.

"I only wish I could keep you here always. What a help and comfort you would be to me!"

"I do not think I should," said the girl bluntly.

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, because I like my way, and, unless I am very much mistaken, you like your way too."

"But surely our ways need not clash."

"I fancy they would; at any rate, I know they might. But as we are never likely to be together more than we are now, it is scarcely worth while wasting our time considering whether they would or not."

"No one can tell what may happen. It is the unlikely things that generally happen—now, isn't it? Anyhow, I know I would give a good deal to have just such a bright active girl as yourself in the house to take part of the burden off my shoulders."

This was precisely what Mrs. Childs understood Mrs. Jeffley either happened to

be thinking at that moment, or would be thinking ere she was much older.

No one possessed a quicker eye for, or a more subtle insight into, the weaknesses of her employers than Mrs. Childs, and she had devoted an amount of observation and a space of time to poor Mrs. Jeffley's failings that finally rendered her quite at home in the darkest recesses of that lady's mind.

"She'd have the young slut there," thought the drudge, as she sped on the errand which had called her out, "before you could wink twice—a-sitting in the best room in the house, and spying and prying, and here and there and everywhere all in a minute, and laughing and saucing with the men, and driving me to look, at my age, for some other place to earn my bread, which the Lord knows is often dry and hard enough now. And Mrs. Jeffley wouldn't care a bit; no, not a pin's point, so long as she got her own turn served, or thought she did. I wonder how they got together. It's that Katzen's doings, I'll be bound. Mrs. Jeffley is crazy about him—anybody can see that with half an eye—and he's sweet on

Missy. He always was, from the day he saw her dancing across the hall with the lid of an old tin saucepan, making believe it was a tambourine. I'd have tambourined her if she'd been my child. However, Miss Abigail Weir, if that's her right name — which for all anybody can tell may be anything — ain't in Fowkes' Buildings yet; and it's my belief she knows on which side her bread's buttered far too well ever to be. Still, mind you," finished Mrs. Childs, mentally addressing the combined wit, wisdom, and wealth of the ward of Billingsgate, which she was at the moment perambulating as swiftly as though beating the boundaries, "if she took it into her head to be mistress of that house, as she is of another in which she has no more right than my Sophiar, it would be neither you nor me would hinder her. All the same, however, I'll do my best to put a spoke in her wheel."

Half an hour is no very long period of time. Yet before it had elapsed Mrs. Jeffley and her charwoman had determined on the tactics it behoved each of them to pursue.

When Mrs. Childs returned from executing

the errand which had necessitated a visit to Crooked Lane, she found Mrs. Jeffley lying back in an arm-chair seeming utterly exhausted.

“Aren’t you feeling very well, ma’am?” asked the Fowkes’ Buildings Iris, in accents of the profoundest sympathy.

“I am so tired—I feel quite knocked up,” answered Mrs. Jeffley; and indeed she did look somewhat pale and worn.

“Ah! I was afraid it was coming, ’m. I didn’t like to speak, because I know you never wish no notice took, even if you’re ready to drop, as one may say; but I thought to myself, when I looked at you this morning, ‘Mistress has been overdoing it again.’ Those were the very words passed through my mind. You ought to be more careful of yourself—you ought indeed.”

“I am as careful of myself as I can,” answered Mrs. Jeffley a little pettishly. “What is the use of talking nonsense? How is it possible for me to be always considering my health, with this great house full of boarders, and Susan going, and not a living creature to help me but you?”

“And I am sure, ma'am, I wish I could help you more; though I do my best, it's little, I'm aware.”

“You do a great deal,” returned Mrs. Jeffley, in a tone which somehow implied less praise to Mrs. Childs than blame to some one else. “I wonder if that girl has got any boiling water?”

“If she hasn't, I can soon make some boil.”

“And do you think you could bring me a cup of tea?”

“Of course I could, 'm; but if I might take it on myself to speak, I wouldn't run down as you are—no, I wouldn't take any tea at this time of the day. Nobody relishes a cup more than I do, especially when good, as it always is here; but it's not fit for one who has so much on her mind as you, 'm. It lies dreadful heavy round the heart, and you should remember you're up and down stairs constant. There was my first cousin, Martha was her name. She died of dropsy, and her one moan was for tea. ‘Do—do make me some, Jane,’ she used to cry, quite pitiful. The doctor said it hurried her off.”

“Well, I have not got dropsy, or anything else the matter with me, except worry,” retorted Mrs. Jeffley, raising herself into an upright posture; “and *that* I shall have till I die,” she added, with a sort of desperation, flinging herself back again against the chair.

Mrs. Childs did not answer; she only shook her head sadly, with a gesture it was a pity none stood near to see. In our midst there live most meritorious actresses who never have been, and never will be, seen on any other than the domestic stage.

Had all belonging to her been that moment swept into eternity, Mrs. Childs could not have left the room with a sadder mien or more lingering step. There must have lain *perdu* in her nature somewhat of the same spirit that prompted the mimic Othello to black himself all over; for though neither Mrs. Jeffley, nor anyone who cared twopence about Mrs. Jeffley, was there to see, she maintained the same mournfulness of tone and demeanour while making the tea and cutting some thin slices of ham.

“You mustn’t be angry with me, ma’am,” she said, in a sort of would-be-cheerful-if-I-

could, but still most sorrowful voice, setting down the nicely laid out tray at Mrs. Jeffley's elbow, "for taking the liberty of bringing you up a morsel of relish. I can't abear to see you going on day after day, thinking always about other people and never about yourself. And the pity is, there's nobody to think about you, 'm. I only wish I'd nothing to do but that. What you want is somebody to wait on you hand and foot—somebody better learned than me, that could do in a big way what I strive to do for you in a little. Now do, ma'am, try to pick a bit. There's not half an ounce of ham—and a beautiful ham it is—you always do buy the best of everything—but I took particular pains to cut it what Captain Hassell calls Vauxhall fashion. I couldn't make you any toast, the fire was so low."

"That wretched girl! she *never* has a fire," murmured Mrs. Jeffley.

"May I pour out your tea—or will you pour for yourself, 'm? I hope you'll find it to your mind. I'll leave you to sugar and milk for yourself. Now do—do, ma'am, force yourself to eat a bit of the ham—it's cut

most delicate. You'll be laid up if you go on neglecting yourself as you are doing—I know you will. I've said so to Sophiar times without number."

Upon Mrs. Jeffley the name of Sophia always acted like a red rag on a turkey-cock.

For that young person she had the natural if unchristian dislike well-formed, healthy, good-looking human beings generally entertain for those unfortunates against whom nature seems to have entertained a grudge.

Instantly she turned to the table, and, after adding a goodly supply of milk, took a long draught of tea—just such a draught as Mrs. Childs, after the heat and burden of a long day's work, liked to take herself.

"That is good!" she said, laying down the empty cup. "I feel better already."

Hearing which delightful news her henchwoman poured out another supply, and again obtruded the ham on Mrs. Jeffley's attention.

"I may just as well have my lunch now as later," compromised the lady. "I shan't touch another morsel to-day."

"Don't say that, 'm," entreated Mrs. Childs.

"But I must say it, for it's the truth. I am getting completely knocked up. I'm regularly worn out."

Mrs. Childs sighed audibly, and proffered some bread and butter.

There are times when silence seems even more golden than it does at others.

Mrs. Jeffley accepted two slices of bread and butter, which she folded face to face—this is a seductive way of utilizing those articles.

"Mrs. Childs," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," answered Mrs. Childs, all attention.

"I have quite made up my mind——"

Mrs. Childs waited warily to hear what Mrs. Jeffley's mind had in contemplation.

"To go to Margate for a fortnight."

"I don't blame you, ma'am," cried Mrs. Childs, relieved.

"I feel I am getting worn out here. What with one and what with another, there is no rest for the sole of my foot. The dove Noah sent out to find out the state of the weather for him had not a harder time of it

than I have, and if I was dead and buried my husband wouldn't care."

Once more the misery of it all proved too much for Mrs. Childs, who, again shaking her head, murmured :

" Ah ! he'd know the difference."

" But," resumed Mrs. Jeffley, " I have no intention of dying yet awhile, or being buried for anybody ; so to Margate I'll go. They say it's wonderfully reviving. Mr. Jeffley and any of the lodgers that like can come down Saturday to Monday—the trip's cheap enough ; those that don't like must do the other thing. I'll kill myself for nobody."

" You'd never get thanked for it," said Mrs. Childs pensively. " And I do hope and trust you'll stick to going, ma'am, though whatever we shall do without you I am sure I don't know."

" You must rub along somehow," answered Mrs. Jeffley. " I dare say I shall be as glad to be back as you to see me. I won't take much down ; just a morning-gown or two, and a Sunday dress ; and the children must be made tidy, for of course they'll go with me ; but I can manage that. By-the-bye,

you were surprised, I have no doubt, to meet Miss Weir coming here this morning?"

"Well, 'm," confessed Mrs. Childs, "to speak the truth, which is a thing, poor though I may be, ma'am, I always endeavour to do, and always should feel bound to do to a lady like yourself—as is a lady, hoping you won't be offended by my freedom, and meaning no offence—I did feel for a moment took aback when I met Miss Abby when I was running out to fetch what Captain Hassell wanted, and hope he found to his satisfaction; but once I remembered myself—I called to mind that you had asked me about her on Whit Monday night, and that I said to the child as we were sitting over our morsel of supper, 'Missus never does anything without a reason, and a good one, and you may depend it was not for nothing she wanted me to tell her some little about Miss Weir.'"

"She is doing some needlework for me."

"Indeed, 'm!"

"And beautifully she does it."

"I always was given to understand no

manner of fault could be found with her as far as cleverness goes," said Mrs. Childs, judicially impartial.

"And so quick, too," supplemented Mrs. Jeffley. "I never saw anyone else get over what she has to do so fast."

"Oh! she's fast enough, I'm aware, 'm. Nobody can deny that."

"Now, I wonder," said Mrs. Jeffley, helping herself to another piece of ham—"('Ill or well, she's getting through the whole of it," considered Sophia's aunt)—"what makes you so set against the girl. She does not say anything bitter against you."

"And very good reason too," retorted Mrs. Childs, venom for the moment overmastering those manners on which she prided herself, and for which no doubt, at a remote period of her life, some one had paid twopence a week. "She couldn't say anything against me — that is, if she spoke the truth."

"I tell you she never has," said Mrs. Jeffley snappishly.

"I am very pleased to hear so, I'm sure, 'm. Though it is no more than justice, I

did not expect as much from Miss Abigail Weir, if that's what Mr. Katzen talks about being her *nom digger*."

"Mrs. Jeffley opened her mouth to ask Mrs. Childs what she meant, but, on reflection, shut it again. There ensued a moment's silence while she sat—bread, butter, ham, and tea all unheeded—looking straight before her at nothing.

"I wonder what her mind's at work on now," thought Mrs. Childs; but she too refrained from speech.

"Nobody knows," began Mrs. Jeffley at last, "the relief it is to me to have got hold of such a girl. She is just the person I have been wanting for years. When I think of the money I've wasted, as one may say, over people who could not put in a stitch decently, I can scarcely contain myself."

Mrs. Childs, for the third time, shook her head mournfully. The incompetency of sempstresses, and the consequent trials of a virtuous matron, were themes on which she felt it scarcely safe to enter, more especially as she herself had recommended a certain Mrs. Lacey, who had proved a

disastrous failure, for the post of wardrobe-keeper to the juvenile Jeffleys.

"Now this Miss Weir," went on Mrs. Jeffley, brightening up a little in consequence of finding she had made a point and could improve upon it, "takes all trouble off my hands. She buys better than I can. She is able to plan and cut out. She is not above altering or contriving, and she has the things here back almost before anyone would have thought she had time to baste the seams. I only wish I had come across her years ago."

"I'm sure I wish you had, ma'am."

"She is likely to be a real comfort to me."

"Any thing or person that's a comfort to you must be a pleasure to me, 'm," said Mrs. Childs, with cringing diplomacy.

"So you need not be surprised if you see her often here now."

"I won't, 'm."

"For I intend to give her a great deal of work."

"Of course, 'm, you will do just as you please about that," said Mrs. Childs, who was bursting with rage.

"You may be very sure I shall, and I

cannot see why you should put yourself out because I have at last got acquainted with the girl."

"Me put myself out, 'm!" returned Mrs. Childs, in a tone of well-assumed amazement and reproach. "I hope I know my place, and have behaved according. I have always strove to do my duty; and though you may sometimes have thought me bold, 'm, you know I was well intentioned, and only spoke because I could not abear to see you fretting and harrying yourself worse than any servant on wages and board-wages, and getting no thanks back. That's why I am glad, indeed, you have come across Miss Weir, 'm, as you think she's likely to suit you, ma'am; and all I hope is, you may never have cause to repent your goodness to her."

"Repent! What should I repent for?"

"I don't know, 'm, I'm sure. It's not for a desolate widow—slaving early and late to keep a bed under her, and without a friend in the world, so to speak, 'm, but yourself—to put herself in the place of a lady who is married and has little dears of children and a house choke-full of beautiful furniture and

good paying lodgers ; but I can't help saying, if—poor though I am—I *had* a husband, or lodger, or children, Miss Abigail shouldn't have a chance of speaking a word, good or bad, to one of them."

"Whatever is wrong with the girl?" asked Mrs. Jeffley testily. "She is always neat, and pleasant, and well-spoken, and industrious. She is not much to look at, to be sure——"

"*That* she is not," agreed Mrs. Childs.

"But handsome is as handsome does, you know ; and I really can't help thinking if she is not pretty she is good."

"You ought to know best, 'm," answered Mrs. Childs.

"That is just what I am not so sure of. As you remark, I have a husband and children and lodgers ; and if there is anything against Miss Weir, I ought to know it."

Mrs. Childs stood resolutely silent, with eyes cast down and lips compressed.

"Come," urged Mrs. Jeffley persuasively, "what is it? You need not be afraid of speaking to me. I am as safe as the grave."

Perhaps Mrs. Childs had her doubts about

the safety of that last resort. At all events, she refused to explain.

"Excuse me, 'm," she replied, "but I'd rather say no more. There are things in most houses—all houses aren't open and aboveboard like yours—that shouldn't be spoke about. Whether a person is taken into confidence or kept at arm's length, that person, unless she is blind, deaf, and a born idiot, can't help seeing, hearing, and trying to fit into place—but it is her business to say nothing, once the door is shut behind her; and nobody living could repeat any remark I ever made about Mr. Brisco, or Mr. Brisco's place, or the child Mr. Brisco took in, I'd care came round to him to-morrow."

Mrs. Jeffley sat perplexed. Mrs. Childs' assertion puzzled her as much as that trick about the lemonade and the queen-cake puzzled the cheated old shopkeeper:

"Give me a bottle of lemonade," said the customer.

When his wish was complied with, he altered his mind. "No, I will not have the lemonade, but this queen-cake."

Having eaten the queen-cake, he prepared to depart.

“Twopence, if you please, sir.”

“What for?”

“The queen-cake.”

“But I gave you the lemonade for the queen-cake.”

“But you did not pay for the lemonade!”

“No, I had not the lemonade,” and left the woman unpaid—feeling she had lost twopence somehow, though she could not tell in what way.

In like manner, it would have required a clear head to disentangle Mr. Brisco from Miss Weir in Mrs. Childs’ muddled sentences, and, after that was effected, to state the precise sin charged—beyond general pertness—by that worthy woman to Miss Abigail’s account. In some ways Mrs. Jeffley’s was anything but a clear head. There were matters about which a child could have led her astray. Utterly guileless herself, each fresh revelation of want of straightforwardness in others came upon her with a terrible surprise.

The possibility of there being two sides to

a question or a human being never occurred to her. She always believed the first story she heard, let it be told by whom it might (her husband excepted). She invariably sided with the plaintiff, and even if forced ultimately to recognise that the defendant's tale might be true, recognised such fact under protest.

Under Mrs. Childs' manipulation such a woman was as clay in the hands of the potter.

The very vagueness of the sin ascribed to Miss Weir added to its awfulness; the lurid light merely thrown on what might have been going on in the old house, and then instantly withdrawn, heightened the horror and picturesqueness of Mrs. Childs' suggested drama! On the other hand, Miss Weir, even if she were the Evil One in female form, did her work well and cheaply.

What possible contamination could she bring into Fowkes' Buildings? Certainly then and there Mrs. Jeffley abandoned the plan she had half formed of asking Abigail to go to Margate with her, that they might get to know each other better; still she could not—she felt it impossible—altogether sever connection with a girl able to shop, cut out,

and sew, and "take a burden off her mind."

"But, Mrs. Childs," she remonstrated, after she had allowed all these considerations to tumble for a while through her brain, "it is years since you worked for Mr. Brisco, and whatever the child may have been then, she seems to have no bad ways now. Of course I am not in a position to tell, but it does seem to me, from all I have heard, Mr. Brisco would never have kept her all this time had she not forsaken whatever evil courses she may have got into long ago. Besides, what chance had she then, poor child, taught no better? Now she is a credit to the good education those ladies gave her. Where would you meet a quieter girl in the streets, or a nicer-mannered one indoors?"

"I have nothing to say against what Miss Weir *seems* to be, 'm, but I know what I know; and having warned you, 'm, I've done my duty, and feel I'll sleep all the peacefuller to-night for having so done. After the kindness you have shown to me—for which I feel humbly grateful—I could not say less,

but I'd rather, if you please, say no more ; only——”

“Only——” repeated Mrs. Jeffley. “You know it's safe with me, whatever it may be.”

“I know that, 'm, but still—however, all I was going to remark had to do with nobody but Mr. Brisco himself. Perhaps there is not so much credit in his keeping her as you think, to *either of them*.”

“Good gracious, Mrs. Childs, what are you insinuating?”

“It's not me, it's others : tongues can't be chained nor bound, neither tied, and there has been a deal of talk, first and last, about the ‘young lady’ in Botolph Lane and her ‘benefactor.’ Put it to yourself, ma'am. Now shouldn't you think it strange if some people who were so badly off they couldn't afford a bottle of stout, and so hard they wouldn't have thrown a starved dog a mouldy crust, turned all in a minute, and without rhyme or reason took in a ragged child, her eyes starting out of her head with hunger—sick and famished—and that, when she'd have been well seen to by the parish?”

“I have always thought it odd,” said Mrs. Jeffley, her eyes wide with eagerness as Abigail’s had once been with hunger, “but I don’t see——”

“No, ’m, I know you don’t—how should you? but there were those as said at the time, strange as it was, perhaps there were good reasons. If some people had been paying money for the child, and couldn’t or wouldn’t keep up the weekly instalments—and those who had her chose that way of shaming them—mightn’t those people have found it cheaper and quieter to keep the child in the old house than to let her go, and have a fuss made, and so get into further trouble? I am putting it to you, ’m, as it was put to me by a party used to the law courts and acquainted with all sorts of wickedness. Don’t you think if all the ins and outs were made plain, and the whole matter revealed as it will be at the Great Day of Judgment, we might not think it so strange after all?”

“I would rather not think,” answered Mrs. Jeffley, greatly shocked. “Take away the tray, please, Mrs. Childs. I couldn’t touch anything more; you have made me feel quite

faint. I wish I had heard nothing about the matter at all."

"Well, 'm, you would have it, you know," returned Mrs. Childs, in a tone of chastened superiority. "With my goodwill you would never have heard a word of the story. I am truly sorry to have upset you, but it was not my doing. It would be my heartfelt endeavour to say no ill of anybody."

And all the while it never occurred to Mrs. Jeffley that no mention had been made of the nature of the particular crime imputed to Abigail Weir. Talk of songs without words! Pooh! Rather talk of slanders without syllable!





CHAPTER XI.

G. BRISCO.

HAD Heaven been pleased to place Mrs. Childs a little higher in the social scale, it is not improbable that she might have compassed distinction as a story-writer.

Two qualifications at least she possessed, not always to be found in those who nowadays profess to supply a public want—an imagination ardent yet pliable, which enabled her to describe events which never occurred, and a calm power of vivid description that rendered scepticism as regarded her narratives difficult. The implied secret in Mr. Brisco's past, as well as the reported conversations concerning it, were wholly and totally the unassisted productions of her own fertile

brain. With her fancy stimulated by the sight of Miss Weir, before she reached Crooked Lane she had rough-hewn the falsehood; ere St. Mary-at-Hill was passed on her way back, she had moulded and shaped the ugly scandal into likely form; and the time consumed in covering the ground between St. Dunstan's Hill and Fowkes' Buildings sufficed to give her own thoughts words, uttered by the supposititious lips of some fanciful individual.

"I make no doubt it's all true enough," she said, in that silent soliloquy she so much affected. "Who is Mr. Brisco more than anybody else, that Missy shouldn't be his child? If she is not, she ought to be. It is more fit he should be her father than any other person."

Which was all really very hard on Mr. Brisco, a man not merely innocent of the charge implied against him, but a man against whom it seemed inconceivable such a charge could have been implied.

For indeed the world of his mind had never been large enough to contain more than two women—his mother and his wife,

and both were dead. Even in thought he had always been loyal. He would not have turned his head to look at Venus, had that probably overrated beauty taken a fancy to walk among the stockbrokers in Throgmorton Street about one o'clock on a busy day; and as for the rest of the female mythology, his virtue was of that Spartan character which could contemplate the spectacle of mature goddesses whipped at the cart's tail, and any number of frisky young nymphs packed off to Bridewell, with equanimity.

A lonely man, a lonely self-contained brooding man, solitary as it is only possible to be in the heart of a great city. There anyone who lists may fashion a hermitage for himself. No need nowadays to fly human haunts, yearn for a lodge in some vast wilderness, a forest hut, a rocky cave, mossy banks, purling streams, and such roots and herbs as may be indigenous to the particular locality selected for penance or meditation.

The meanest house in London will serve all purposes of seclusion just as well. If any anchorite, or sybarite either for that matter,

choose to close his door against the world, he may sit at ease and hear the great billows of struggling humanity rolling majestically, crying pitifully, beating madly upon the pavements, sobbing through the night; but not one wave shall creep into the dwelling of him who has voluntarily cast off his kind. Utter isolation can, amongst many other luxuries, be commanded by one who pays his way. He will not be meddled with. He may buy his roots and herbs in the nearest market. He may live more miserably than any hermit of old in his cell; surrounded by a multitude, he can hold himself aloof from contact with them. It is competent for him to exist for himself, and absolutely by himself.

The country affords no such freedom as the city; a wide desert—no solitude equal to streets and lanes crowded with busy, anxious people. Even should the hermit's beard be long, and his flowing locks grey, his appearance strange, and his gestures uncouth, passers-by will soon cease to wonder, and the very arabs turning wheels in the roadway, or sparring with each other in the gutter, refuse to interrupt their employment for the sake of

shouting, "Here's another guy!" after one whose features and figure have become familiar.

It had chanced thus with Mr. Brisco. When first he entered into full possession of the old house in Botolph Lane, where previously he had merely rented an office, speculation was rife concerning him; but that had been all done with for many a year. Curiosity was over-past; chilled and mortified, it decided Mr. Brisco must be sour grapes, and ceased to jump for the bunches. The nine days' wonder induced by the advent of little Miss Weir—"a mere bag of bones and bundle of rags"—had for years been spent; likewise the astonishment caused by Mrs. Childs' discharge or defection (the neighbouring population took sides as to which word was correct) was almost forgotten. That portion of the ward of Billingsgate bounded on the east by Dunstan's Hill and west by Pudding Lane exercised its minds no more about the old house and its tenants. Miss Weir was as nice a tenant as house need have; bright and busy, she pursued her cheerful way, ever

willing to help, ever ready to rejoice with those who were glad, and mourn with those who mourned.

"She's like a glint of sunshine," said one, athwart whose path sunshine fell rarely.

"I'll never forget her when my little Bess died," murmured his neighbour.

She did what she could; and, after all, what can a queen do more? In great conservatories we see stately camellias and the royal amaryllis and fragrant stephanotis and exotics trembling with the very excess of their fragile beauty, and then there stands on the sill of some narrow window a plant, modest, and to outward view of little worth, which yet fills the poor room with perfume, and talks in an inarticulate language, intelligible enough to those hearts for which the message is sent, of something even in this world exceedingly to be desired: hope and content amid the most lowly surroundings; peace to be compassed, spite of the maddening turmoil of constant work and hard endeavour.

To Abigail Weir it was not given to carry any message to those of high estate. The

old house in Botolph Lane was the grandest mansion she had, in her short life, entered ; the drawing-room at the Rectory the only even ordinarily well-furnished apartment her young eyes ever beheld. But what of that ?

In a king's palace she had not been one half so useful ; every energy she possessed was always on active service. She had no leisure to repine. If evil moods fell upon her—and what sort of nature can it be the black dog never visits?—she found time too short to permit of fondling the mischievous guest. She did what she could, and appreciative neighbours recognised the fact, and silently applauded a courage which never seemed to falter, industry that was well-nigh tireless.

Had she been born in the parish, no one could have felt more inclined to make her free of it than did all the old inhabitants sprinkled up and down the lanes. As for Mr. Brisco, the mystery, if there were a mystery connected with him, had long ceased to exercise any mind, or strain the capacities of any brain. When Mr. Katzen was appointed consul for New Andalusia, Botolph

Lane and Love Lane and St. Mary-at-Hill knew as little about that gentleman's landlord as it had done years previously.

And not a soul in the length and breadth of London appeared to be much wiser.

He might have dropped from the clouds, for any trace his footprints had left on earth. He might have been his own father, and grandfather, sister, brother, uncle, and aunt, for all mention he ever made of relatives, dead or living. Where he came from, what was his past history, how it chanced he lived poor, stranded, and friendless, were questions many persons had once tried to ask, but which they asked no longer.

Between himself and the world there stood a wall no one could even peep over. Not a glimpse was to be obtained of the private grounds in which he walked mentally; except Abigail Weir and her friend Frank Scott, not a creature suspected the fact of those frequent night-wanderings, when, hand in hand with the dead, he roamed through the ghostly silence, invoking shadows from out his past, and seeking communion with fancies that had vanished with youth, and

with those whose bodies had for long years known no companionship save darkness and the earthworm. Constantly we see this tendency to revert to some former state of unreal and ideal happiness in lieu of welcoming the sunshine or the shadow of each day God gives us as it comes ; to lay wreaths on the wet ground to gladden eyes now closed on earth, though gazing, so we humbly hope, on the fadeless flowers of Paradise, instead of planting in the midst of our most desperate affliction slips of hope and roots of endeavour, which even in this world may bloom and bear fruit, that some one at least, if not we ourselves, worn and weary, hungry and athirst, may stop and gather.

All his life Mr. Brisco had been unfortunate. Over his cradle two evil spirits kept guard—poverty and pride ; poverty that was grim, pride that would have been ludicrous but for the cruel penury amid which it contrived to flourish.

Brisco senior, an over-worked and badly paid medical practitioner in a remote country district, was the younger son of a younger son, who in his turn was the descendant of

Heaven only knows how many younger sons, one of whom may, at some extraordinarily remote period, have been actually the younger son of the head of a great family.

The Heralds' College might have disentangled without snapping this long-drawn chain of asserted relationship ; but the great family, many a generation before Mr. Brisco was born, had ceased to see it. To them, indeed, it was actually invisible ; and as there were scattered about the world hundreds of heirs concerning whose *bona fides* there could be no question, it seemed in the highest degree improbable the rusted links could ever again become distinct.

To Doctor Brisco, however, his connection with the great family was plain as a pikestaff. Unhappily, pedigree is one of those objects from which the further a man stands the more clear becomes his vision. Sons, elder sons of elder sons, may sometimes forget the traditions of their house, and the position conferred upon them by birth, but the far-off relation never omits to bore his acquaintances with the tale of those he can claim "Sib" with ; ay, even if it be over his cups in a

village "pub" where there is a long score against him, he will give himself airs on the strength of some kinsman or kinswoman dead and gone, long turned to dust, who made a *mésalliance* of which he is the notable representative.

Doctor Brisco, as he was called, though indeed he had no right to such a prefix, did not go about the world buttonholing everyone he met, while he confided to them the secret that he came of those whose names were writ in history; nevertheless it was by some means generally understood if he "had his rights" he would be rolling along the high road in a carriage, instead of tramping through life's muddy lanes on foot.

In his shabby surgery there hung a genealogical tree, root, trunk and branches of which were there for all who listed to look at, and marvel concerning; indeed, it was a fearful and wonderful work of art. Likewise in the best parlour there was to be beheld, effectively framed, the coat-of-arms and crest of the Briscos, who had intermarried with the Granthams, A.D. 1578. Two Miss Granthams, co-heiresses, allied themselves

with two Briscos. The one Brisco, being wise, did well in consequence of his wife's money; the other, being foolish, squandered the other sister's share in whatever amusements were going on about that period of England's history.

Further, those same dreary walls were adorned with plates—extracted probably from some forgotten annual—representing the lordly seats of the two remarkable families; in both cases plenty of park, plenty of deer, of trees, masonry, shrubs—everything as it should be about such abodes.

The Doctor, though no humbug, was wont to sigh when anyone surveyed these drawings.

At such times he honestly felt as though the scenes depicted represented the happy playgrounds of his youth. In those great houses not a soul knew that such a person as himself existed; but he never forgot his notable kinsfolk.

Did they marry, did they die, did they repair abroad; did they meet with an accident at home, get into any trouble, matrimonial or otherwise; return to their

ancestral halls—Doctor Brisco was mentally in attendance.

To follow their movements, to read of their alliances, to identify himself with their joys and sorrows, disappointments and successes, was almost the sole amusement of a dull, laborious life.

It was like a child's game of make-believe. He knew it meant nothing, could never mean anything to him, yet out of the doings of his relatives he erected air-castles by the hundred, and was wont to say, "Ah! if good never comes to me, it will some day to my children."

His greatest trouble really seemed to be that not one of his sons took after him, unless indeed Grantham. When quite an infant Grantham had been wont to regard the family tree with fixed attention, and as he grew up he developed a remarkable predilection for reading about the great deeds achieved in times past by the men of his house.

"You'll have to make money, boy," said his father, "and then they will hold out the right hand of fellowship fast enough. Make

money—that is the only way the chivalry of the nineteenth century can show itself. In former days, when a young fellow wanted to get to the front, he had but to perform some deed of valour; now he must work twice as hard for years to fill his pockets. When he has filled them, the ball is at his feet. It is of no use being a Grantham, or a Brisco, or anybody else, if you have not money to keep up the name. Look at me; there is not a man in the parish as well born as I am; and yet every new-fledged cotton lord, even if he drops his h's and eats with his knife, thinks he patronizes Ralph Brisco when he asks me to dinner. Patronizes *me*! Ha! ha! ha! it is really too good!" Yet the poor fellow did not seem to find the idea really provocative of mirth, for his laugh lacked the true ring a laugh should have. On the contrary, it savoured of mortification.

As for Grantham, at a very early age bitterness had entered into his soul and remained there. At school, at play, in his father's house, and out of it, the curse of poverty lay heavy upon him. There are burdens which do not grow lighter with the

lapse of time, and shortness of money is one of them. No estates, no legacies, no gifts, came to that narrow village home. The world went on, and it was hard to make a sovereign go as far as formerly. Neither the Briscos nor the Granthams evinced any wild desire to take their relations to the family bosom. They married, they were given in marriage, they died and were buried; at last, it was all the same to their far-away kinsman. After long years of as gallant a fight as ever one of his ancestors made in battle on sea or land, the poor Doctor was stricken with paralysis, and he might have died in the workhouse, or starved, had it not been for Grantham, who was then in London seeking his fortune.

The elder brothers were dead or vanished—there never were any sisters; so on Grantham devolved the duty of doing what he could for both his parents.

In a humble way he managed to support them; but when at last he stood sole mourner beside his mother's grave, the fortune he had come to London to seek seemed as far off as ever.

He had the sense to lock away his genealogical tree, and hold his tongue concerning relations stranger to him than any strangers ; but a man cannot lock up memory or ensure forgetfulness even by maintaining silence, and that which had grown with the young man's growth, and was as truly a part of him as his keen cold blue eyes, was not likely to be exorcised by a long course of loneliness and abstinence from every innocent pleasure.

It was ere he had scarce recovered from the blow inflicted by his mother's death that he met the love of his life.

"And a bad day as ever broke it was for her, poor darling," often declared the poor darling's nurse, as garrulous as she who taught Juliet to walk. "Little I thought, when I first saw him come into the house, where master had been so silly as to ask him to dine, what was to come of it. If I had, I'd have soaped the stairs, or put poison in his wine. There's no accounting for tastes—he wouldn't have been mine."

There is nothing more easy than to be wise after the event. Had anyone known

what was going to happen, probably Miss Daynes might never have become Mrs. Brisco. Certainly Grantham Brisco would have hesitated about asking her to marry him.

Old Mr. Daynes was a gentleman living not merely up to the edge of his income, but beyond. He had sons who looked for allowances from him ; daughters married to professional men struggling to keep up a position ; daughters unmarried he could not afford to portion. Apparently he had a good business, but it was rotten through and through—so rotten indeed that if Mr. Daynes had not died in the very nick of time, he must have been bankrupt.

Within a fortnight after the funeral, and before the whole of the mourning garments ordered had been sent home, the Daynes' card-house tumbled down about their ears.

The creditors took the life insurances—upon which advances had been made—the furniture, the brougham, the horse and harness, the lease of the desirable suburban villa—see advertisements of the period—the

book-debts—everything, in fact, that was left to take.

Mrs. Daynes went to live with one of her married daughters, who did not in the least want her; the sons had to shift as they could. One of the Miss Daynes took a situation as governess; the other was glad to meet with an old lady who wanted a companion.

“It is a comfort Faith is so well provided for,” said Mrs. Daynes.

“I suppose you are not aware,” observed the son-in-law she addressed, who was a solicitor, “that Brisco had gone security for your husband to an amount that will keep him with his nose to the grindstone for many a long day?”

It was true. Dear Faith’s husband had “signed his name as a mere matter of form;” and if ever a man found cause to curse the day when he learned to write, that man was Grantham Brisco.

What was the poverty of his youth in comparison with the poverty of his manhood? What is any poverty in the country like the poverty of town?

He had always lived frugally—sometimes barely—but now he felt bound to stint himself even of the necessities of life. Left to the guidance of her own soft impulses, his wife would have been a sweet, submissive, useless creature. Sweet she was always, even in her tears—a woman to caress, and kiss, and keep far as possible from all knowledge of hardship. Not even the old nurse, who loved her beyond all things except herself, could spoil a nature naturally unselfish ; but in such a crisis of a man's life as that at which Grantham Brisco had arrived, he needs something more than sweetness—he wants help.

He was strong enough morally and physically to eat no food save a penny roll during business hours, and return to a meal consisting of weak tea, a stale egg, bread and cheap butter, at night ; but on such fare he might be excused for sometimes cavilling over the weekly bills, and, when his own personal expenditure is well-nigh *nil*, grumbling because the household accounts seemed to him excessive.

Abroad he had no ease ; at home he had

no peace. That accursed security dragged away his very life's blood, and yet he could not bear to tell his wife it had been incurred for her father. He dreaded to go home after a day's hard work, because upon the threshold he was met by something which seemed to him even more accursed than the paper to which he had affixed his name—the old nurse upon whose lips there was always a demand for money, and who finally went so far as to say “he ought to be ashamed of himself.”

In the hands of women a man is absolutely helpless—unless he is a bad man, in which case the tables are turned.

Mr. Brisco was not a bad man. His fault, if it could be accounted a fault, was absolute honesty. He had incurred a liability, and he meant to pay it.

Bankruptcy would of course have left him almost free to commence the world again; but though he had locked the family pedigree away, it was there for all that.

He could not find it in his heart to drag two ancient names—Grantham, Brisco—through the mire of Basinghall Street for

any Daynes in England ; bravely, therefore, he set out to pay the liability for which he was responsible.

It was hard, he felt—very, very hard. Often he cursed the memory of soft-talking, soft-living Mr. Daynes ; but cursing could not pay off the debt incurred.

Mr. Daynes' creditors were not indulgent. They would have been lenient to that pleasant gentleman had he lived ; but Mr. Brisco was a horse of quite another colour—a horse willing to work, willing to slave. Such a horse is always safe to lash, so they lashed him.

In life there must be ever those who play and those who work ; Mr. Brisco was amongst those forced to work.

All the best years of his life were spent in a struggle with poverty, worse by far than his father had ever waged : not an instinct of his nature but was crushed down by the iron heel of necessity. Morning, noon, and night he worked to pay off that Shylock bond contracted for no extravagance or necessity of his own. How he worked no one save God and himself might ever know.

The humiliations he went through, the personal privations he accepted, the heat and burden of that awful day, must be written somewhere, though not on earth.

Doggedly men go through this sort of punishment constantly, Fate flogging them till they almost cease to feel the whip. Eventually Mr. Brisco ceased to feel it—he grew accustomed to being trampled on; lawyers' letters were no more a terror. "If you live long enough in hell," he said one day to a solicitor, "you must get acclimatized to brimstone and sulphur."

Through all this time he had been going down—down—down—till the Daynes, who never paid anybody, and in some extraordinary way shuffled off all responsibilities, felt it impossible any longer to recognise poor Faith's husband.

When Mrs. Brisco's child was born, she and Mr. Brisco had moved so far east as Lower Clapton; after that their address was Homerton.

Nobody, however, called at Homerton—no one, indeed, knew where Homerton was, for which reason the young wife and her

little boy were left alone to comfort each other.

After a while the young wife fell ill, not with any pronounced disease, but of a sort of "languor."

Madly the husband did for her all that lay in his power. He ran in debt to tradespeople; he borrowed money; he stinted himself more and more; he worked harder than ever.

"My darling," he said one morning, "I am in such hopes of getting a paying agency. This evening I trust I shall have good news for you."

For answer, she meekly lifted a white face for him to kiss.

"Dearest," he murmured, "we must get you into the country and coax back the rose-tints."

"Kiss me again, love," she answered, in a stronger voice than he had heard for weeks. "Now go—good-bye!"

He went—elastic, hopeful, full of plans. He returned, having secured the agency. It was summer-time, and he looked up at the windows, hoping she might be lying on the

sofa looking for him. All the blinds were down, yet the house did not front the west.

He put his key in the lock, and, with a strange sort of hesitation, opened the door.

A woman he had never before seen came forward.

“If you please, sir,” she asked, “are you Mr. Brisco?”

“Yes—yes,” he said breathlessly.

“I am sorry to tell you, sir, your poor wife is gone. She went quite peacefully at four o’clock. Lord save us!” she added in quite a different tone, for Mr. Brisco had dropped like one dead on the floor.





CHAPTER XII.

MOST LONELY.

GRIEF does not kill. If it did, there are few who would outlive their first youth.

Trouble traces wrinkles on the heart, but fails to stop its beating. Our capacity for happiness is limited ; our capacity for sorrow boundless. Sometimes we may well pause to ask ourselves how humanity can bear the burdens laid upon it—how it is possible to endure the anguish and the agony which may be comprised in twenty-four hours of existence, and still remain outwardly unchanged.

Grief did not kill Grantham Brisco ; though for a while he lay on the sofa, to which kindly neighbours carried him, like one bereft of

sense and feeling, he arose ere long, and again faced life, which could never for ever seem the same to him.

He had been married for over seven years when his wife died. The time was not so very long, yet it had sufficed to work many changes. All the Daynes were scattered. Mrs. Daynes was gone to a world where it is to be hoped she found a warmer welcome than in her daughter's house. That daughter's husband had been struck off the rolls. There are families the members of which ally themselves as surely with poverty or disgrace as the sparks fly upward.

Not a man or woman of her own blood stood beside Faith Brisco's grave. There were but two mourners—her husband and her nurse. They faced each other in the sombre coach, and exchanged no word either on the way to or from the churchyard. As the earth rattled on the coffin-lid, Mr. Brisco could have shrieked aloud, but he made no outward sign. A brave man bound to the stake would have so comported himself. The ordeal had to be gone through—that was enough. Poor husband—poor young wife! they might

have been happy here, perhaps; but God knows best.

She was gone, and again the world lay open before Grantham Brisco, to make what he could out of.

He did not make much of the chance offered. Perhaps that was scarcely his fault, for a man handicapped with an old servant and a young child can scarcely, even if he be rich, map out a quite independent future.

He was aware his servant entertained a prejudice against himself, as well as in favour of extravagance; but she had been fond of his wife, and loved the little boy; so he kept her on. What better, indeed, could he have done?

The old struggle with poverty had still to be waged—debts had accumulated with that fatal rapidity which seems in the very nature of debt; the agency did not pay as he expected it to do: perhaps only half his heart was in the matter. He made a couple of bad sales, and his principals became dissatisfied. He was ill in body as well as mind, though he did not know it. The horror of

sleeplessness was laid upon him like a curse ; and because he could not endure the silence and loneliness of the night-watches, he began those weary wanderings of which the old house in Botolph Lane could have told so many a tale. He did not roam about the narrow rooms at Homerton. After the nurse and child were at rest, he was wont to pass out into the darkness, and walk for hours across Hackney Marshes, sometimes striking the Newmarket Road, or skirting Rockholts, making his way along Green Grove Lane to the Lower Forest.

There was scarcely an inch of all that then almost undiscovered country unknown to him. He might have been seen striding on the banks of the Lea, where the heights of Upper Clapton and the coldly gliding river showed clear as day in a flood of moonlight ; but his general goal was Epping. Along the green alleys, beside which giant trees kept guard—their interlacing branches forming a fretted canopy, not close enough to hide the stars shining down upon the flitting figure of one most wretched—he paced. She had been all the world to him, he often cried aloud in his

solitary anguish—all the world ; and she was gone.

“What shall I do—what *shall* I do?” he was wont despairingly to ask the solemn silence, and for answer there came back to him only the rustle of the leaves or the jar of some night-bird.

It is a true saying that “grief is like shame, just as we take it.”

Mr. Brisco took his very badly indeed. Which amongst us who has suffered but knows from experience that over the grave of any sorrow grass will of itself spring in time, but it does not lie with us to hurry the process. Nature knows all about it better than we do. The seed of fresh hope is within each one of us, and if we only let it alone, after many days green shoots which have been watered with our tears, and nourished with the very anguish of our souls, will appear to refresh and beautify our desolation. We may not hasten the coming of those tender blades, but we can prevent their appearing altogether—we may in our passion root them up, so that across the narrow resting-places of sorrow or of sin no grass of

grace may wave, no tender bud of promise bloom for ever. This was how Mr. Brisco treated his grief—he tried to trample it under foot, and failed. He had made to himself an idol, and, when it was cast down, the very blackness of despair settled upon his soul.

And the blow dealt was hard—who dare deny it?

It would have been a hard stroke to any man who had loved his wife; but it was unutterably hard to Grantham Brisco. To him she was the whole of existence; during years, every thought, every effort, every sacrifice had been for her. And now it was all ended—with a full-stop death had rounded off a sentence which seemed to the unhappy husband but just begun—and he was forced to take up the sheaves of his life again, with the grain eaten out of every ear of corn they contained. The world is kindly enough, though, maybe, it does not take the interest in, and feel the veneration for, a great sorrow in those of low estate, that it does when the bereaved individual chances to have everything the heart can desire save one ewe lamb—one among a herd of blessings; and Mr.

Brisco knowing this, and being, moreover, blessed or cursed with a somewhat cynical nature which neither asked nor desired sympathy, elected to make no moan about his loss, determined the memory of his wife should be associated with nothing common or unclean.

When acquaintances would have uttered ordinary words of condolence, he stopped them short. His grief was—not between God and himself, for he left God out of it altogether, save in a spirit of rebellion and bitterness—but between himself and the dead. She was gone—for him there remained nothing save to make such a best of the remainder of life as seemed possible.

There were a few who, moved by a feeling of pity, held out the right hand of fellowship; but Mr. Brisco showed by such unmistakable signs that he preferred his own society to the best they could offer, that at last he was left absolutely alone. He dropped out of companionship with his kind utterly. Had he been dead, he could not have owned less in common with other men.

Abroad, as at home, in business and out of it, he was one of the most ungenial of

created beings. In no office did he ever stop to chat ; he transacted whatever business he chanced to have in hand, and then went his way. Even the weather failed to interest him. He did not seem to care whether it were hot or cold, snow or sunshine ; but whether he did or not, he had no remarks to offer on the subject, and he listened to the remarks of other persons with ill-concealed impatience.

“ He never even ‘ makes ’ of his son as any other father would,” grumbled that son’s nurse ; and this was quite true.

For a long time even the sight of the boy was agony to him. When the child laughed, he turned his head away ; when he played and shouted, he could have stopped his ears. The joyousness of youth grated on the man’s nerves like a lively tune heard in a house of mourning. Nevertheless, his heart was all unconsciously putting out little rootlets which had for nourishment the lad’s future. As the poor overworked, underpaid doctor reared air-castles for his son, so Grantham Brisco began to dream of greatness for the child of his dead wife.

Never for an instant was she forgotten. Everything he did, everything he thought, was done and thought with reference to one whom no earthly action could pleasure or sadden. The scanty food, the pinching personal economy that had once seemed petty trials, now proved some sort of comfort to the widower. If she had lacked much, it was a bitter solace to feel he denied himself even the few luxuries in which he might have indulged. Rich viands, rare wines, even had they been at his command, would, remembering the bare poverty of their married life, have choked him. If he could have felt happy, he would have hated to be so. Had he noted a single shoot of hope appearing on the tree of his existence, he would have destroyed it ruthlessly. A strange, sad, lonely, wrecked man, wrecked unintelligibly to the understanding of most outsiders.

His boy was more than eight years old when Mr. Brisco awakened one day to the fact that he had forgotten the simple lessons taught him by the dead woman, and promised to grow up an ignorant little vagabond.

This seemed a terrible thing to one who

had in his own youth been an eager student.

“Master Ralph must go to school, Hannah,” he said with decision.

“To school? That child!” exclaimed Hannah, disrespect and dislike curiously blended in her tone.

“Yes,” was the answer. “See that he is properly dressed on Monday morning, and I will take him to Mr. Fergusson’s.”

This time Hannah made no direct reply ; but Mr. Brisco heard her banging the sauce-pans about in the kitchen, and saying for his benefit :

“Could anybody believe it, and his own flesh and blood, too—wants to kill *him* next.”

At the end of the first quarter Ralph knew no more than had been the case when he went to school. He could not spell words of two syllables ; in despair, Mr. Brisco wrote to his instructor, and this was the communication he received in return :

“DEAR SIR,

“If you *will* keep your boy at home four days out of the week, I think it some-

what unreasonable on your part to expect much progress in his studies.

“Yours faithfully,

“ALEX. FERGUSON.”

That evening there was a very bad quarter of an hour at Homerton. Mr. Brisco did not say much ; but what he did say was to the purpose. No one could have been left in doubt as to his intentions. He meant his boy to be well educated ; and as Hannah had kept him from school, he must send him where the chance of staying away could not offer.

He had discovered that Hannah was in the habit of supplementing the small wage she received from him by doing work for the neighbours—washing, ironing, scrubbing, anything, in fact, likely to bring in money. During these absences the boy ran wild, or else likewise visited the neighbours. About these offences he spoke.

“If I did try to earn an honest penny, you ought to be the last to blame me for it. I did not spend what I got on myself, not a farthing of it,” declared the angry woman, bursting into tears.

Mr. Brisco did not speak, for he could not. He did not open his lips to contradict the torrent of reproach Hannah proceeded to pour forth against him. Almost like one guilty, he stood silent, as she rehearsed his shortcomings—enlarged on the comfort of the home from which he had taken his wife—of the grief it was to “that angel now in heaven” not to have “things befitting about her.”

He listened in wonder, marvelling at last almost whether he had committed all the sins laid to his charge; but he answered no syllable. Before the bar of what earthly tribunal shall a proud man defend himself against misconception and misrepresentation? He may not so defend himself. Pride ties his tongue concerning matters which another would dwell on, in order to repel the charge.

How could Mr. Brisco tell anyone, how much less a foolish ignorant shrew, of the misery of the day he had fought through; of his long youth of poverty; of his manhood of struggle and disappointment; of his heart rent in twain when the light of his life was taken from him; of the unrewarded toil; of

the gallant fight known only to himself; of the privations he had never accounted as such; of the daily warfare he had waged with circumstances; of the way he had tried to trample down his grief, never leaving one thing undone his brave right hand found to do; of the hopes, faint though they might be, of making a better thing of existence for his son than he had for himself; of the pinching economy he had practised, in order that the boy might not lack any reasonable comfort?

It was impossible, so he stood waiting with apparent indifference till the woman's vehemence had spent itself and dead silence reigned, broken only by panting sobs; then he said:

"I do not judge you. I believe you meant to act kindly by my child, but yours is a kindness which would ruin the boy. I cannot trust him with you any longer. He must go to a boarding school, cost what it may; he shall not stop here another week."

Hurt and troubled though he was, he would not give the woman notice. He remembered that she had loved his wife; in

her way, he knew she loved the child, and he felt it impossible to cast her from out the shelter of his poor home, which was at least warmer than the outer world.

But she saved him all trouble by loudly and angrily discharging herself. She would not stay if her darling was to be taken from her. "She wouldn't stop—not she."

"Very well," answered her master; "but remember I have not given you warning."

"Oh! there's other ways of getting rid of those that have served their turn, besides giving warning," she replied, with a toss of her head and a defiant backward glance shot over her shoulder as she left the room.

After that Ralph went to a school situate some twenty miles from London. The master had the name of pushing on his pupils, and Mr. Brisco wished the boy to make up for lost time. Presumably his son, goaded along the road to learning, did what in him lay to get on, for his progress certainly was more than creditable; but the change from the softness and indulgence of his home life proved far too great, and before the year was out the schoolmaster sent in all haste to

say he was dangerously ill—that his life hung on a thread.

Once more a struggling man had to face fresh and heavy expenses. It was six months before the matter of education could even be thought of again, and then the boy was placed under the charge of a curate who only received three pupils.

This time Ralph did not acquit himself to the satisfaction of his teacher. He was reported idle, mischievous, hard to manage, fond of pleasure, impossible to instruct. For Latin and Greek he manifested a wicked hatred. He cared for nothing but amusement and idle stories; and, in a word, the reverend gentleman begged that a pupil who could never do him credit, and who had been received on reduced terms at a time when the R. G. was very glad indeed to get pupils on any terms, might be removed.

With a sore heart Mr. Brisco did remove the lad. Remembering what he himself had been as a boy, dutiful, hard-working, his son's shortcomings seemed, perhaps, greater than they were. In all the sins mentioned, Mr. Brisco could but see the worthless

feathers of the Daynes showing themselves.

Lazy, self-indulgent, unscrupulous, every man of them had been.

“And if Ralph is to grow up like them I would rather lay him in his coffin,” thought the poor father, as he travelled down to take charge of his youthful prodigal.

Only one son, and he not a comfort. Only one child, for whom all his self-denial, all his hard work, all his plans, seemed destined to go for nought.

Again Ralph was brought to London. This time his father got him into a good public school, and kept the lad under his own eye. Till he was a little over thirteen affairs seemed to progress more favourably.

If he did not learn much, still he learnt something.

“I must give him time—he is young—he will do well yet,” thought the father.

It was at this period a chance offered of renting the old house in Botolph Lane.

Mr. Brisco saw the advantage of such an arrangement, and entered into an agreement

to take over the lease.' He laid his plans: he would toil and save for his boy, whom he meant to be a barrister. He would indulge in no superfluity. He would live frugally as of yore. During the day he would work hard, and at night he would open the old volumes business had forced him to lay aside, and look out passages in Cicero and Demosthenes to read to his dead wife's living son.

But meantime he and his son were no nearer than they had ever been. It was only in the imagination of an eccentric man that wayward youth and crabbed age sat down together to read in the works of those who have left no message for a frivolous and light-minded generation.

It was a dream, yet it pleased Mr. Brisco. The boy was not fourteen, but he thought already he ought to have an old head on his young shoulders.

On the face of the earth there was nothing further from Ralph's mind than serious effort or study of any sort. He had youth's lack of comprehension of sorrow, shortness, struggle. He did not understand

his father. He saw other boys well supplied with pocket-money, well dressed, well fed, well cared for. He did not understand why he too should not be well dressed, well fed, well cared for.

So there came a division between him and his father. He had been asked by a certain schoolmate, named Harris, to a picnic party. Mr. Brisco at once negatived the invitation. Ralph said nothing, but went. When he returned home his father asked where he had been. The boy told him. Had his mother been living she would have smoothed matters and made everything right, but as affairs stood everything went wrong.

In dogged silence Ralph listened to his father's reproaches.

"I must end all this," said Mr. Brisco at last. "For years you have been a trouble and anxiety to me. I shall now place you where your propensities will be restrained, your disobedience checked, and your abilities, if you have any, developed. You are more than I can manage. I must find some one—I will immediately find some one able to control you. Now go to bed."

Without a word Ralph slunk off. His father never had struck him, but perhaps he felt he deserved a thrashing.

He did not get it, however. Afterwards Mr. Brisco felt glad to remember this, for next morning the lad was nowhere to be found—nowhere.

He had no money—he did not take a thing out of the house save himself and the clothes he wore over-night. Dressed just as his father had seen him last, he must have stolen from his home and gone—where?

High and low he was sought for, but not found. Days passed—weeks—months—and still no tidings were heard of the missing lad. Though she stoutly denied all knowledge of his whereabouts, Mr. Brisco for a long time clung to the belief that Hannah might, if she chose, furnish a clue to the mystery, but at length he felt compelled to abandon this idea.

She was in service earning her wages hard by. How could she be keeping a boy in hiding, for whose discovery a reward was posted on every police station in the kingdom?

Had he known his son to be dead, Mr.

Brisco fancied he should have borne the trouble better. What in comparison to this loss of her child had been the loss even of his wife? It was the one charge left to him by her. How did it happen he had failed in his trust?

Once again the old anguish, from which time had taken somewhat of its poignancy, returned, bringing with it a deeper anguish still. Little over middle age, he looked an old man. His hair became grey, his face haggard, his body wasted. Night after night he rose from his bed when sleep refused to visit him, and wandered through the rooms, and paced the roof of a house in which he had hoped to make a fresh start for success if not for happiness.

Pecuniarily he was doing better, comparatively he was doing well, but the search for his boy could not be conducted without much expense; and when he dared to face his accounts, he found that, so far from making headway, he had actually got into debt more deeply than ever. If health failed—if he were stricken down—what remained save the Union or suicide?

Often in those days he felt tempted to end the long struggle; but he was no coward; besides, at any moment the wanderer might return. Like the father of old, from afar it was possible he should yet behold his prodigal; and though he had no fatted calf to kill, or gold ring to put on his finger, or friends to make merry with, still the child—her child—would be restored to him. Dim and dark though the future seemed, it was the faint hope of once more seeing his son which kept the man alive and enabled him to work. He was still advertising, still employing detectives, still drifting over a sea of doubt, when one winter's night he received a letter addressed in an unknown hand.

Only a few lines were traced on the half-sheet of note-paper he drew out of the envelope.

“Cease searching for your son. He has found a friend who will do better for him than you ever could.”

As he finished reading, all the old wounds in the man's proud, lonely heart seemed to burst out bleeding afresh.

His son was alive, but with strangers, who were preferred before the father who had toiled, and suffered, and pinched, and denied himself for the boy as he had denied himself joyfully for the mother.

It was then the iron entered into his soul—then the wall, which had always stood between this man and his fellows, rose in a moment so high that thenceforth he stood practically alone in a world filled with striving suffering, mourning, rejoicing, triumphant humanity.





CHAPTER XIII.

IN MITRE COURT.

AS a rule great enterprises do not spring in a moment to life booted and spurred.

It may be true enough, as some persons assert, that remarkable ideas have flashed across their brains with the swiftness and brilliancy of lightning ; but, after all, an idea is one thing and a perfected project quite another.

For this reason, once for all, it may be said that the great undertaking which ultimately brought money and notoriety to Karl Katzen was not a sudden inspiration. It grew and grew till it attained magnificent dimensions.

He was as one who, casting strange seed

into the ground, watches with astonishment a lordly crop springing from that which himself has planted.

Mr. Katzen's imagination supplied that gentleman with an at first very miscellaneous assortment of grain for culture. Some of it came to nothing. Some, when the crop was ripe, proved valueless; but one root bore ears, as great as those in Joseph's dream. By the time he had finished harvesting, the new Consul's barns were full, and he had to enlarge all the plans of his life in order to hold the produce.

It was some time, however, before he even thought of planting. In the wicked ways of monetary London he was no novice. He regarded the City exactly as Blucher did—as a place to sack. He had raised “the one thing needful,” by every possible and well-nigh by every impossible means. He had been agent for specialities without number, and it may safely be said in no single instance did his principals come out scatheless.

But that was never Mr. Katzen's fault; some one else was always to blame, sometimes even the principals themselves. It

was as easy to get firm grasp of an eel as of Mr. Katzen. He managed to keep just within the law, though how, sailing so near the wind, he contrived to do this he alone could have told. For indeed he did things quite beyond the law. He established different houses in various parts of the world, and drew upon those fictitious firms with a cool disregard of possible consequences that would have made any honest man's hair stand on end.

Yet somehow it all came right. A person with unlimited assurance and almost unlimited resource, who is "constantly about," would indeed be dense if he failed to meet under the shadow of the Dragon and the Grasshopper with at least one flat a week. Mr. Katzen met with a great many flats—and a great many rogues—and so the whole game finally became one of manipulation. He never permitted anything to drift; he was always prepared. When the time was ripe he failed; not in a loud, demonstrative, aggravating sort of way—but meekly and mildly.

He knew a solicitor accustomed to manag-

ing such affairs, and so was wont to get his "matter shoved through" without any unnecessary fuss.

As a rule creditors hate trouble, and hate publicity still more. Many of them are not so solvent themselves that they care to have attention attracted to their losses. Therefore if Mr. Katzen offered anything in the way of a composition they were usually fain to accept it—and avoid bankruptcy. Already he had thus compounded three times ; and there seemed no great reason why he should not compound two hundred and ninety-seven times more—when the Consulate for New Andalusia dropped at his feet.

Of course that was a job. The person who procured the appointment for him had an interest in his being so appointed, but that did not signify. For the first time in his life Mr. Katzen felt himself in a position to play at football with Fortune. Hitherto he could only be regarded, could only regard himself, as a mere hanger-on at her gates ; now he held a card for her assemblies.

Archimedes wanted a waste piece of ground

in space for the screw which should turn the earth. Mr. Katzen knew he had found a vacant plot where he could plant his machinery, but for a time he was at a standstill for some world to turn.

There is a great deal in a name. In his case Mr. Katzen believed there was all in a name, and the result proved his belief was not mistaken.

To the mind of ordinary humanity—you, and you, my neighbours, and you in the next street—it might not occur that the title of Consul meant anything beyond a certain salary ; but you, and you, and you, would be mistaken. Does not “Sir” carry a weight, and General, and Colonel, and Captain even ? and yet no one so designated may receive a penny of income from capital invested or from work fairly done.

Once the notion was correct enough, but it is not now. It is greatly to the credit of the innocence of tradespeople that a title and a carriage can deceive them even in these days of “stores.” After a little—when they have eaten more freely of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—they will learn a lesson

which must prove bitter to their so-called betters.

“The tide has turned,” said Mr. Katzen to himself when he took possession of his new offices in Mitre Court, City, still almost as quiet and out-of-the-way a spot as the courtyard on which the old house in Botolph Lane looks out.

No awkward demands now for further references, or cash in advance to tradesfolk, or something at least on account before necessary work was commenced. Alterations were hurried on ; the rooms were swept and garnished, papered, painted, varnished, white-washed, filled with brand-new furniture ; and then, all being ready, Mr. Katzen seated himself in his new chair in front of a large library-table, looked at the still unsoiled blotting-pad, the envelope-case filled with headed notepaper, the large glass inkbottle into which pen had never yet been dipped, and considered the future, not without a vague wonder as to what that future might bring.

His was an inscrutable face — his a phlegmatic manner. As a rule he met

disaster and success with the same marvellous equanimity. When he made a *coup*, he did not go about the City open-mouthed, proclaiming his good fortune ; and if he came in for a loss, no one could have told the fact from his look or voice.

It was true he had taken a departure in the matter of his new dignity ; but this was partly owing to the circumstance that imagination had for the time being obtained possession of his nature, and greatly because he had a purpose to serve in sounding the trumpets and beating the drums in honour of Karl Katzen, Consul for New Andalusia.

He knew—no one better—that many people might utterly fail to see the importance of his position, and that it was necessary to impress upon persons like the Jeffleys, for example, that he had suddenly ascended many rungs of the commercial ladder. Mrs. Jeffley would spread the news like a town-crier. Jack even might casually mention it. Common talk is as cheap a form of advertisement as can be adopted, and it was well, he felt, that the talk should make him as important an individual as possible.

Further, though he did not in the least know what he was going to do with New Andalusia now he had got it, he felt there could be no harm in setting men's tongues wagging about a virtually unknown country. He might see his way to floating some mine, or starting some new industry—meat-preserving, emigration, fruit-growing, grain-exporting, humming-birds for ladies' bonnets—all sorts of plans and notions were seething in the caldron of his busy brain. What he wanted was to make money, and he did not care how. "After years I have at length got my great chance," he said to Mrs. Jeffley. "Patience, and you shall see what I will make of it."

In the race he meant to run he did not carry an ounce weight. Even his rather doubtful antecedents counted for nothing. In London there are always fresh people coming forward. By the time one set of dupes have been squeezed dry, another are pressing on their heels in their greed for high interest—in their thirst for money they have not earned, clamouring almost to be cheated, to be eased of the hundreds and

thousands they are ready to invest so recklessly.

“If I can hit on a really good thing, it will be so much the better for us all,” considered Mr. Katzen; and then he walked to the windows, and drew down the blinds, and afterwards walked back to the table, and stood beside it thinking.

In truth, he was in a state of mind unusual for him—restless. He wanted to begin to make his fortune that hour—that instant.

The silence of the place did not calm him. On the contrary, the knowledge that a regular clerk was seated in the outer office, though in one way gratifying, rather interfered with that sense of personal liberty which can only be thoroughly enjoyed by a man who locks his door every time he goes out, and takes the key with him. He knew he should soon grow accustomed to the change, but meantime it was not quite pleasant. Further, he did not exactly like his clerk. He had, in a lordly sort of way, offered the berth to Frank Scott, and Frank Scott refused to accept it. This annoyed him more than the matter seemed worth, and

caused a temporary coolness between Mrs. Jeffley and a young fellow "who could not see his own interests."

"You'll be just such another as Mr. Jeffley," said the brisk Maria, "and always stand in your own light. You'll never have such an offer again, Mr. Frank."

"That is very likely," answered Mr. Frank; "but I should not like to leave my present situation."

"Well, well; remember you have nobody but yourself to thank, whatever happens," retorted Mrs. Jeffley sharply—so sharply, indeed, that Frank, who had been rather in favour for a short time, thought it prudent to keep as much as possible out of his hostess' sight till his offence should be forgotten.

"If you can't get a clerk to your mind," said Mrs. Jeffley to Mr. Katzen, "why do you not give a helping hand to your old landlord, and let him have the situation?"

"He would not take it," was the reply.

"You try him, that's all."

"I lack courage," persisted Mr. Katzen. "Though he is as poor as one of your church mice, he is as proud as Lucifer."

"I have no patience with such nonsense," declared Mrs. Jeffley. "He ought to be thankful to get such a chance. I am sure the way that girl has to work is cruel—there! and I do not mind who hears me say so."

"She does not think so," was Mr. Katzen's only comment; but he did not cease considering Mrs. Jeffley's suggestion.

A man like Mr. Brisco was the very person he wanted. Still, he could not make up his mind to hazard such a proposal.

There was a fence in Mr. Brisco's nature the boldest rider seemed afraid to take. Even Mr. Katzen's impudence shrank from attempting it, and that gentleman had known him for a long time. Nevertheless, circumstances alter cases; and Mr. Katzen, in his now well-furnished, well-appointed offices, with his rank painted on the door, felt he was a different man from the Karl Katzen who rented a dark little room at a low rent in Botolph Lane, and often scarcely knew where the next meal was to come from.

"Hang it!" he thought, walking again to the window, and this time pulling up the

blind half-way. "A fellow so poor, and past his work, ought to be glad and grateful to get a salary for only sitting and answering questions and writing a few letters. I will put it to him on the very first occasion that offers."

At the precise moment when he arrived at this determination, the clerk appeared, and stated that Mr. Brisco wished to see Mr. Katzen.

"This is friendly," said the new Consul, as Mr. Brisco entered, holding out his hand with great cordiality, and shaking Mr. Brisco's bloodless fingers with a heartiness which caused that gentleman to wince. "Do you know you are my earliest visitor? I am glad it should chance to be you who assume the character of 'first foot.' I think you will bring me good luck."

Mr. Brisco smiled bitterly as he said, "Yes, I know I look just the sort of person to bring good luck."

"Now I can't have that," remonstrated Mr. Katzen. "I have a presentiment—I feel it here," and he touched the left-hand side of his waistcoat—"that I am going to

be fortunate ; and who knows but that I may not prove instrumental in improving matters a little for you !”

“That is a very kind remark,” returned Mr. Brisco. It seemed a plain sort of speech, yet, though Mr. Katzen looked at his visitor hard, he could not quite understand what his late landlord really meant by it.

“You see, I have got almost settled here,” said the new Consul, glancing not without pride round his room.

“Yes, you look very clean and new,” answered Mr. Brisco, referring, doubtless, to the office ; for certainly no human being could with truth have said Mr. Katzen looked clean or new. Rather, he always presented a very second-hand appearance, seeming to stand almost as much in need of varnishing, and painting, and whitewashing, as his place had done. “I like your old house better, though.”

Mr. Brisco inclined his head in acknowledgment of the implied compliment. “Hayburn has given up the offices,” he said.

“No ! Has he, though ?”

“Yes. Sold his furniture to Welford ;

paid his rent up to last March, and left me without a tenant."

"What an unprincipled hound! What a dog in the manger! And I did so want those rooms."

"Yes, it is unfortunate."

"It will be a serious loss to you, having those rooms empty," observed Mr. Katzen, who knew perfectly well Mr. Brisco had come to tell him of Mr. Hayburn's change of front, hoping he would return to Botolph Lane.

"I have served my apprenticeship to loss," said Mr. Brisco.

Sitting there in the bright sunshine, he looked indeed a man who had served as he stated.

His coat, once black, had changed with age to green. It was of an antique cut, worn quite white at the seams, and polished across the shoulders. His trousers, of shepherd's plaid, seemed to have shrunk with the years, that had likewise rendered them baggy at the knees. His waistcoat was of some sort of nankeen, fashionable, possibly, at a remote period, but it was faded with frequent washing,

and glazed with repeated starching. He had a green and white muslin necktie, and his only ornament was an ancient silver watch, attached to a steel chain. As for his hat, its pensive browns looked almost picturesque in the strong light which brought out many changing shades, and lit up also the severe lines of that sad, emaciated face. He had a high forehead, a small aquiline nose, thin and almost colourless lips, small cold eyes of a steely blue, scanty grey hair, whiskers equally scanty and equally grey, that gave him an almost rugged appearance. He was tall, and had no doubt been, at one period of his life, a fine-looking man.

“Old Mortality,” one of his tenants had dubbed him, and Mr. Katzen, on that summer’s morning, thought the name fitted to a nicety.

In the new Consul’s freshly painted office—smelling of varnish; furniture glossy and polished from the maker’s hands—Mr. Brisco looked as much out of place as a dingy “old master,” its frame tarnished and broken, would seem in the drawing-room of a *nouveau riche*.

Such as he was, however—a mere wreck

of what had been—he sat with the light streaming full on his face and figure. He and Mr. Katzen might at that moment have suggested to the mind of any fanciful observer the Spirits of the Past and the Present. For Mr. Brisco, no future of prosperity appeared possible; whereas, to men like the new Consul, there is often but one stride from failure to success.

“I expect you have known a good deal of loss,” said Mr. Katzen, in answer to his old landlord’s last remark. “But let us hope there are better times to come.”

“If you please,” suggested Mr. Brisco, “we will not speak about what sort of times may be in store for me, or of me, indeed, at all.”

“As you like,” returned Mr. Katzen gaily. “Of what shall we talk? I know there are not many subjects that interest you.”

“Suppose you speak about yourself,” suggested Mr. Brisco. “I shall be glad to hear how you are getting on, and I fancy the theme will not weary you. Men as a rule, I notice, do not weary of harping on one string if it be a personal one.”

“To that rule you are an exception,” answered the Consul.

“To most rules I fancy I am an exception.”

“My faith, I think you are—I think you are,” said Mr. Katzen, softly patting the table. “But we were not to talk about you, I remember—only about this good child, Karl Katzen. Well, what is it you desire to know as regards the new Consul and your old friend. (I wonder what he is diving after—what wind has blown him here,” added Mr. Brisco’s old friend in a mental parenthesis.)

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing.”

“What are you going to do?”

“That depends—make my fortune, for one thing.”

“How——”

“What is the good of planning? I have no plans. Wherever I see a chance I shall go in and win—wherever there is a weak point in the wall I shall enter and take possession.”

“You really think you are going to make money.”

“No, pardon me—I do not think; I am sure. So far, there has been no time to compass anything. You come to me before we are another year older, and you shall hear what you shall hear.”

“It will give me great pleasure to hear you are doing well.”

“I believe you, I really do—I am quite in earnest. I cannot think there is any jealousy about *you*.”

“Why do you lay such an emphasis upon that *you*—do you know many men given to the sin of jealousy?”

“No, I do not; but I have it on Miss Weir’s authority that all men are jealous.”

“Do you mean Abigail?”

“Even so—the charming Miss Abigail.”

“What can she know about jealousy?”

“You had better ask her, dear sir. She knows a great deal about many things. *I* won’t ask her—she might box my ears.”

For a moment Mr. Brisco sat silent, looking down at the pattern of the carpet; then, lifting his head, he said with abrupt directness:

“I will be plain with you—I did not come

here to-day to ask after your welfare, though I am glad to hear you mean to prosper. I wanted to know—that is—do you remember some time ago bidding me observe that Abigail was a child no longer, but a girl—who might have lovers ?”

“ I well remember—that was at Whitsuntide. What then ?”

“ Had you any special reason for making such a remark ?”

“ I ? Lord, no !”

“ You are quite sure ?”

“ Quite. Are you sure you have no special reason for reverting to the subject ?”

“ Were I only to answer ‘ No,’ I should not be answering quite truthfully ; yet I feel I have no right to answer ‘ Yes.’ ”

“ I suspect you have, though !” exclaimed Mr. Katzen. “ Take me into confidence—tell me what is troubling you. Am I not the little one’s friend ? Have I not known her since six years ? She was but a mite then in her short skirt and that funny jacket, and now she is—but you know what she is now better than I. Yes, tell me, Mr. Brisco—you could not tell anyone better able to

advise and help you than I—who is the lover. I told her I felt a conviction there was one at least waiting round the corner. I await with impatience your disclosure.”

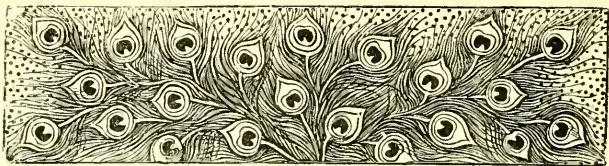
“I have nothing to disclose,” answered Mr. Brisco slowly. “There is, so far as I know, not any lover; but—I am scarcely satisfied about the girl. She is changed in some way—and she has no mother—we can go to,” he added after an almost imperceptible pause.

“How, changed? How, not satisfied?” demanded the new Consul. “I implore you to confide in me, to pour out your heart to Karl Katzen, who knows all about women from their tight boots to their false hair. What you tell shall be buried deep here,” and again he placed a hand on his waistcoat.

“There is nothing much to tell,” said Mr. Brisco.

“At any rate, tell it,” urged his old friend.

“I suppose I had better,” answered Mr. Brisco, and after a moment’s hesitation he began.



CHAPTER XIV.

“ABOUT ABIGAIL.”

“**I** DO not think,” said Mr. Brisco, “I should have noticed the change which has taken place in Abigail had it not been for the remark you made about her.”

“I have a ‘think’ too,” answered the new Consul; “and it makes me feel very sure of your own self you would have noticed nothing. No—no—I pray you not to look so black; since a long time you are aware your old friend Katzen is nothing if not frank.”

Supposing Mr. Brisco’s friend Katzen had substituted the word “rude” for “frank,” he might have been nearer the bull’s-eye he meant to hit.

For a moment Mr. Brisco hesitated; then

he said, "You are right. Occupied with my own concerns, but for the advantage of coming in contact with a younger and less preoccupied intelligence than my own I should certainly, I fear, have failed to observe events passing under my eyes."

"As for example?" queried Mr. Katzen, with no look of greater interest in his face, with no brighter light in his dull eyes, his hands motionless—his whole aspect that of a person who was listening to mere babble for the sake of civility.

Foreigners sometimes overdo the thing.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Brisco, rising, and buttoning his shabby coat around his lean figure, "I ought not to have intruded upon your valuable time a matter so merely personal."

"I seem able to do right never!" exclaimed Mr. Katzen, rising too, and literally forcing his visitor down again into the just vacated seat. "If it happen that I express an opinion, I am wrong; if I ask for information, pray for a mere glimmer of light to guide me along the darksome road of a woman's mind—always supposing a woman

to have a mind as well as a will—I go wrong once more. Do extend a little patience to one who does not quite understand the English game of hot and cold. I want to find, I do—but though perhaps you believe you are playing some sort of music to help German stupidity, upon my soul, I do not understand a note of it. What events are they which but for one casual remark of mine would have passed unseen under eyes usually keen and quick enough?”

“They can scarcely prove of interest to you,” said Mr. Brisco coldly. “I forgot that you had entered on a new sphere, and have naturally left former times behind.”

“I have left no times behind—a man can’t cast his skin like a toad, and drop portions of himself along life’s weary highway. Besides, I would not, if I could, forget an hour spent in the old house. Ach! have I not been happy there, spite of all the trouble; and if I took not an interest in you and the girl, in whom should I take an interest?”

“You are very good indeed to say so,” remarked Mr. Brisco, mollified, yet scarcely appeased.

"I think so, which is more. Can I not recall that bitter winter morning when I went to the office early on no pleasant errand of mine own! That charming Mrs. Childs with her lovely niece in attendance stood aside in all humility on the first landing to let my great self pass upstairs. The good creature's face was pinched with cold—every part of it which was not black was blue. Dirt was ground into each line of her countenance—she was so dirty, she looked like an old master, or a blurred engraving; so dirty, she struck me as absolutely picturesque, and I could not avoid stealing another glance. It was then I saw in her face something more than the pinch of cold or the black of grime.

"‘What has occurred?’ I asked; and she, good diplomatic soul, made answer, ‘Only that we have got a stranger here.’

"‘What sort of a stranger,’ I asked—‘a white mouse or a new kind of black beetle?’ Mrs. Childs always calls them ‘beetles,’ and as she ought to be an authority on black things, I suppose she is right.”

"Your memory seems excellent," suggested Mr. Brisco.

“It is indeed,” said Mr. Katzen, taking no notice of the impatient ring in his ex-landlord’s voice; “but not to weary you, and to what you English so funnily call cut a long story short, Mrs. Childs, after declaring it was worse than a mouse ‘or any other vermin,’ ‘up and told me’—to adopt a favourite phrase of her own—that there was a little girl in the house—that where she had come from was a mystery—that the clothes which covered her were in such rags it was only the threads held them together—that she was at that very minute as ever was, while Mrs. Childs stood talking to me—begging my pardon for the liberty—going on dreadful, in a manner of speaking all in a quaking delirium, and that something warned her evil must come of it: she only hoped it might not be to Mr. Brisco himself, who had almost snapped the nose off her face for offering to go, in the piercing cold too, in search of a policeman, who would have taken the young hussy to the station-house. Dear Mrs. Childs was most energetic and delightful, and the maiden Sophy stood sniffing and chuckling till her aunt said she had better mind her manners, more especially

as such a disgrace had come upon a decent house. She also told me of a bad dream she dreamt, no longer ago than the night before last, or she hoped she might never stir again ; and would have enlarged upon the fact that dreaming of being on the water meant trouble, but I cut her short, and went up to my office, where I found annoyance enough waiting to put dreams and girls and rags and Mrs. Childs out of my mind."

"I wonder I tolerated such a creature about the house," muttered Mr. Brisco.

"She did her work," commented the Consul, "but I fear she used a great deal too much Nixey. She was, she is, a living example of the powers of black lead ; the only drawback is, she does not polish. Well, to return to our sheep."

"I have not an idea what sheep it was, or where we left it browsing," interrupted Mr. Brisco.

"Here is a colley can find it," laughed the other. "We have never really lost sight of your pet lamb."

"You could scarcely have selected two words less appropriate to myself and the

girl had you searched the dictionary through," retorted Mr. Brisco—"nothing more grotesque than the idea of my keeping a pet could well be conceived; and whatever else she may be, Abigail certainly does not resemble a lamb."

"I do not know that she does," confessed the new Consul. "She is not fluffy, and it might be hard to lead her even with the help of a blue ribbon anywhere she did not want to go. The first time I saw her, I thought she was an imp. My faith! shall I ever forget my amazement? I had been absent for nearly three months—I left you in winter; when I returned it was spring. I had passed through a bad time, a very bad time. The ill news I found waiting for me the morning good Mrs. Childs and I met on your stairs took me abroad, and kept me there for many an anxious day; and it was a beautiful evening in April when once again I inhaled the delightful odours of Love Lane. The evening was Saturday. *En route* to Fowkes' Buildings, I thought, 'I'll just see if the old house is still standing.' It was looking as I had left it. I ran up the steps, I put my key

in the lock, the latch lifted, and in a moment I passed from the subdued grey of Love Lane into a hall bathed with the yellow light of a setting sun. The door looking out on the courtyard stood wide; around the courtyard were the silent warehouses, deserted till the second morning of another week. A silence as of perfect rest—not death—reigned throughout the place. It seemed like an enchanted palace, with broad streams of mellow sunshine flooding marble floor and the great staircase and the once panelled walls. There only wanted one touch of life, and it came.

“From out the dining-room there sprang a small figure, clad in a blue skirt and a red garibaldi. It carried a tin pot-lid, on which it played some music to which it sang and danced. It went through every possible antic of movement and gesture; except the dancing crane, I have never seen anything half so funny:—‘Tir-a-la—tir-a-la—la-ta—tir-a-la—tir-a-la—la-ti—tir—tum—tir-to—tir-de—tir-a-la—tir-a-la—tir-a-la—tir-a-la—tir-dum—’ and then she saw me——”

“Time she did,” interposed Mr. Brisco.

“Now don’t be cynical,” entreated the narrator, “because you know you take an interest in the young monkey.

“‘Well, fairy sprite,’ I asked, ‘and where do you come from?’

“‘Well, burglar man,’ she replied as bold as brass, ‘and where do you come from?’

“She was not in the least afraid. I put the question to her, and she said contemptuously, ‘What should I be afraid of? But *you* have no business here—how did *you* get in?’”

“I suppose you are recalling these events under the impression that they must prove interesting to me,” interposed Mr. Brisco. “If, however, I assure you that they are on the contrary unpleasant, perhaps you will kindly confine yourself to the present, and say whether you had really any hidden reason for the remark you made some time ago to the effect that Abigail was a comely girl who had reached a marriageable age.”

“Is she not what you call comely—is she too young to think of marriage? Heaven! she is not too young for other people to think of marrying her!”

“What people?”

"What people! any people—every people."

"Has it ever come to your knowledge, that amongst the multitude of human beings you seem to imagine must desire to marry the girl, there is one in especial for whom she cares?"

Mr. Katzen paused. He felt almost inclined to answer, "Yes, she cares for Karl Katzen," but doubt and prudence combined kept him silent. Besides, he wanted to see Mr. Brisco's hand. He believed that gentleman held a court card of some sort, and there was nothing he desired more than to know its exact value.

"No," he said at last, "I have not any information on the subject. How should I have?"

"I cannot tell," answered Mr. Brisco. "I cannot tell." There was such a tone of despondency in his words that Mr. Katzen's curiosity at once sprang into more active life. He took his cue in a moment.

"Look you here, long year friend and landlord," he exclaimed, "why should we play at hot and cold any longer? You believe there is something to be found—what is

it? You want my help to find it—where do you think is the most likely place for us to go look?”

“Why should I trouble you about the matter?” said Mr. Brisco.

“Why? Because I remember—because you and the girl are more to me than most. It was because I wanted you to feel I was one with you, that I talked a while ago what you thought babble. Is it babble to say I have not forgotten the old wide-eaved, many-gabled wooden house where I was born; that in waking dreams I see often the pine-woods and the blue mountains of my fatherland (I thank D’Israeli the first for anglicizing that phrase); that the blue-green depths of the Rhine still hold mysteries for me, and that, though common-sense says ‘No,’ fantasy makes me see and hear the Lorelei seated on her high grey rock, singing such sweet and plaintive songs as cause wise men to rush to their doom? After all, the backbone of life is memory, and the longer a man lives, and the stronger his mind grows, the more he recurs to the past.”

“It may be so,” agreed Mr. Brisco: “yet,

personally, I cannot think memory a blessing."

"No?—yet consider what pictures she paints for one! Where is the art gallery hung with such gems as you may find hung on the walls of any man's mind?—many a sad scene, many a sordid interior, no doubt! But think of the landscapes—of the glorious dawns, of the sleepy noons, of the busy street scenes, of the tender moonlights, and the magnificent sunsets any man who has eyes to see, and a heart to understand, may collect to gladden his heart withal, before he has reached the first third of man's allotted span."

"No doubt you are right," said Mr. Brisco dreamily. He was trying to understand—striving, as at some time we must all have striven—vaguely to comprehend the purely intellectual, and to us well-nigh unintelligible view of men, nature, and art, which is taken by foreigners. We—speaking of English folk generally—look out of the windows of our heart; we narrow everything into a question of feeling. It is not so with those born out of our nice little, tight little island. Sentiment may cloud or gild the world's face

to the eye of a foreigner, but as a rule he surveys all God's wondrous gifts to man through mental spectacles.

He sees things as they are ; we see them as we feel them.

It is this difference, I imagine, which separates us from foreigners. They are too wise, too sensible, too shrewd, to please or be pleased with a foolish nation impelled along the rails of life by the force of its own weight.

"Yes," said Mr. Katzen, answering Mr. Brisco's informal thought. "I am quite right. The girl's first coming, her terror, her rags, her entreaty, have left no such picture on your memory as the first sight of that lean, quaint child, dancing over the marble once trodden by your great Sir Christopher, has on me. Ach Gott ! as I talk the years roll back, and I see her once again with her quaint airs and funny graces—'Tir-a-la, tir-a-la, tir-de'—and then, in the middle of our after-talk, down comes Mrs. Childs, fresh from the rite of some mysterious dirt-offering.

" 'What are you doing, missy ?' she cried, in that pleasant voice of hers. 'You had best get out of this. If Mr. Brisco finds you

a-dancing about his hall, and a-wearing out of his marble stones, he'll pay you.'

"Then missy went ruefully, finger in mouth, tambourine again transformed into a pot-lid hanging by her side, the little twinkling feet changed in an instant to feet that seemed to carry a burden, and her wonderful, tender, saucy eyes full, quite full, of tears.

" 'Who is she?' I asked Mrs. Childs; and then that excellent person said she was the sweeping of some slum. I thought of the dust before the besom, and inquired where the dust had gone.

" 'To her bit of a room, sir,' answered dear Mrs. Childs. 'It's there she generally goes when she's in one of her tantrums.'

"Without saying anything to Mrs. Childs, I sought that bit of a room, and knocked.

" 'Who's that?' sang out the waif.

" 'The bad burglar man,' I answered.

" 'The bad burglar man must take himself off,' she said. '*I'm* going to bed.'

" 'Good-night, then, my dear,' I cried through the keyhole, 'till Monday.'

"Yes, Mr. Katzen?"

“Yes, Mr. Brisco.”

“I meant to inquire, what then?”

“I meant to inquire, what now?”

“I fail exactly to catch your meaning.”

“Really? Well, perhaps—anyhow, this is the way affairs stand. The little bright, impudent child has grown to a brighter, impudent girl, and you fear for her—fear the woman’s lot has come—fear she likes somebody who perhaps likes not her the right way.”

“What are you driving at?” asked Mr. Brisco, a hot gust of passion agitating his voice, and causing the swift delicate colour the new Consul had learnt to know so well, to tinge his pale cheeks with the faintest shade of pink. “If anyone cares for the girl, and I have no reason to suppose anyone does, why should he not care for her in the right way? Abigail is no baby. She needs no mother to warn her of the world’s pitfalls. The women she has mixed most with are not usually given to reticence. She might fail to pass an examination in the world’s wickedness. One French novel, I dare say, contains more vice than is known in the

whole ward of Billingsgate. But she is wise, and spite of her somewhat flippant tongue, modest. I am not afraid she will go wrong, no—spite of——”

“What?” questioned Mr. Katzen, as the elder man paused abruptly.

“Nothing—or rather, as you might attach a wrong meaning to my sentence if I left it unfinished, I will say, spite of her antecedents——”

“You are aware, then, of the nature of her antecedents——”

“Yes.”

“Thereby hangs a tale, I suppose.”

“Which I have no intention of telling.”

“I suspect you are wise.”

“I suspect you have not the slightest notion whether I am wise or foolish.”

Mr. Katzen smiled.

“Come,” he said, “don’t let two good friends quarrel. The subject of Miss Abigail’s grandpapa and grandmamma—shall we put the doubtful relations back to that point?”

“You can put them where you please,” interrupted Mr. Brisco. “There is no ques-

tion but that the girl was born in lawful wedlock."

"You know the fact for a certainty, do you?"

"She is as legitimate as you are, I was going to remark; but—you must excuse the awkwardness of my amendment—since I have not the faintest notion of the circumstances under which you came into the world—the comparison might not be quite fair to Abigail."

"You leave me untouched this time," answered Mr. Katzen. "My father and mother were tied up tight enough in that matrimonial knot even you English find it sometimes hard enough to undo. Darby and Joan, they are living still. Boy and girl, they were betrothed; young man and young woman, they were married; husband and wife, they brought up a large family; old man and old woman, they yet pass in and out of the same house they entered hand in hand bride and bridegroom. No, Mr. Brisco; Miss Abigail's papa and mamma may have been persons of higher social standing than the parents of this poor foreigner; but I confess,

considering the circumstances under which the dear child made her first appearance in Botolph Lane, I should scarcely judge her to be the lineal descendant of any belted earl.”

Mr. Brisco looked straight in the speaker’s face, while he said gravely :

“So far as I am acquainted with Abigail Weir’s pedigree, there is no earl in it.”

“But something better, perhaps?”

“There was one honest man ; but he can only be considered a very poor substitute, spite of all our fine phrases concerning that *rara avis* being the noblest work of God.”

“Now, I wonder,” considered Mr. Katzen, “whether, after all, you have only been a very sly old fox, receiving money for keeping our sharp young friend out of the way.”

The idea was so congenial and delightful, that at once Mr. Brisco seemed to grow in wisdom and in stature before the new Consul’s eyes.

“I’ll be bound that’s the way of it,” he thought. “Wait a little, though ; now it behoves me to be doubly cautious.”

And even while his heart burned within him, he managed to maintain absolute silence.

“Well, Mr. Katzen,” said his visitor, at length. “Am I the unworthy subject of so much conjecture?”

“Yes and no,” answered Mr. Katzen, apparently waking up to the urgency of present affairs. “I was thinking of you, but only in connection with your strange charge; for put the matter as you will, Miss Weir is a strange charge.”

“She is one I did not seek.”

“I believe that, utterly. I used often to wonder why you took her in at all.”

“That is a question which, in the former days, often perplexed me.”

“You did not like her, With half an eye anyone could see that.”

“No; on the contrary—she was antagonistic to me.”

“Yet you kept her out of pity.”

“Perhaps—partly—I scarcely know why I did allow her to stop.”

“Yes, I guessed that. The whole thing used to puzzle me vastly—Miss Abby most of the whole. She knew she was not wanted, and, personally, I should not have imagined the old house a palace likely to captivate a

child's fancy ; nevertheless, having made up her mind to stop, she stopped. I often laughed, thinking how like a stray cat she comported herself—satisfied with the poor welcome of mere sufferance, making a great feint of being greeted with effusion, keeping out of the way as much as possible ; and when forced to appear in evidence before you, cringing into her small body, or else figuratively rubbing her head against table-legs and chairs, and odd corners, as is the preliminary form of conciliation first adopted by unwelcome pussies. After a time, who so impudent and familiar as the stray tabby ? How she clamours for milk, and insists on meat ! How she luxuriates before the fire, and selects the softest pillow to stretch herself upon ; with what ill-concealed impatience or lofty condescension she receives the advances of friendly strangers ! As I talk, I declare the likeness deepens. Think of how scurvily Abigail now treats her fellow-creatures ! Looking back, I can scarcely imagine her to be the same girl who at one time, when surprised or frightened, had every tone and trick and gesture of a street-beggar."

“She was never a street-beggar, sir.”

“Your pardon, I never said she was—only that she acted the part most excellently well. However, that has nothing to do with the matter in hand; we had best let bygones be bygones, and only think of Miss Abigail as we see her grown—bright, saucy, pretty. Come, Mr. Brisco, though I dare say you found out, long ago, that beauty is vanity, and woman a snare—confess Abigail is pretty, pretty enough to give some young fellow the heartache.”

“I suppose she is,” answered Mr. Brisco.
“Yes, I see she is.”

“We are getting on—I am glad of that,” said Mr. Katzen; “and now you came here to tell me something.”

“I came here to ask whether you had made that remark of yours haphazard or from observation, and you will not answer me straightforwardly.”

“My good heavens! dear friend, what can you want more than I have said? I know no young man whose heart is aching; but reason assures me there must be one such young man, if not more. Who he is—what

he is—where he is, I have no more idea than a baby; only he must be, I am sure of it. We have all been young; I have been young myself once.”

If Mr. Katzen hoped to elicit any polite remark from Mr. Brisco about his being young still, he was disappointed.

“I dare say you were,” said Mr. Brisco “but that does not help me much.”

“No?—yet I think it might. The person who is not too old to remember his teens may prove of some service in disentangling the vagaries of youth. Give me one end of your skein, and let us see what we can do in the way of unravelling it.”

Again Mr. Brisco paused, then he said hesitatingly :

“I have scarcely anything to speak about, but yet——”

“A straw shows how the wind blows, a straw may enable me to help your—inexperience.”

“Put it that way if you like. I *am* inexperienced in such matters. I do not profess to know much about women—my knowledge of girls is even less; yet I confess the change

which has lately come over Abigail—though but for you I admit I might have failed to see it—appears to me extraordinary.”

“ I asked you before, ‘ as for example ? ’—and you took huff and would have walked off had I not prayed you to remain. Now we have come to a comprehension, however, what is this metamorphosis which has removed our dear rebellious maiden to a sphere not recognisable ? If I met her, should I feel constrained to ask, Can this be Abigail ? ”

“ The alteration might not strike you, but it-surprises me.”

“ Has her hair turned white in a single night ? Has she lines across her forehead, and have crow’s-feet stamped their foul imprint round her eyes ? ”

“ No ; but—you remember how she used to sing ? ”

“ I remember, at any rate, how you used to love to hear her sing,” answered Mr. Katzen ironically.

“ Well, if I tell you I should be *glad* to hear her sing now, perhaps you will understand the alteration a short time has sufficed to work.”

"What, has Abigail ceased carolling?" asked the new Consul, genuinely surprised.

"Entirely."

"And does she seem out of sorts, as you phrase it?"

"She is grave, if not sad."

"And all this has come about since my departure?"

"All this has come about since your departure."

"Perhaps she is pining for me."

"She may be," answered Mr. Brisco drily; but there was something in his tone which suggested that he did not think it probable.

Mr. Katzen grinned appreciatively.

"I am right. Depend upon it," he said, "Abigail misses her old playfellow. Ah, you don't know, you never knew, what a companion I was to our little friend; and, my faith! what a companion she was to me too! I can hear her screams of delight now when she used to find where I had stolen away. It was a rare house that of Sir Christopher's for hide-and-seek! Once the young monkey led me a pretty dance! 'Twas in the dusk; then —after I had exhausted the premises and

myself—she jumped out on me from the dog-kennel.

“ ‘Come, you awful child,’ I cried, ‘confess—this is not the first time you crept in that hole.’ ”

“She put her fingers in her mouth and dropped her head and began rubbing the toe of her right shoe backward and forward over the stones—you know her trick—and would have slunk off, only I held her fast.

“ ‘How many nights,’ I asked, ‘did you sleep in the dog-kennel before Mr. Brisco found you in the cellar?’ ”

“ ‘Two,’ she whispered.

“Great heavens! Think of it—think of that wretched bag of bones dragging itself under those steps and lying there hidden while we were all going backwards and forwards! Then consider how soon she threw all the trouble off, and went laughing, singing, dancing, about the rooms!”

For a moment Mr. Brisco had clenched his hand tight, but he immediately opened it again.

“How interesting,” he remarked, “not to say instructive, to hear of the many things which have been going on under one’s own roof without one’s own knowledge!”

“Very,” agreed Mr. Katzen drily, “especially when one considers how numerous are the incidents which may be enacting now while one remains in a state of equal ignorance.”

Mr. Brisco looked straight in the new Consul’s face. “Again I ask you,” he said, “is there any meaning hidden behind your words?”

“And again I answer, None, beyond what you English talk so much about and really value so little—plain common-sense. If Miss Abigail have got a lover, do you think it is likely she will take you into confidence?”

“It is *not* likely,” confessed Mr. Brisco, “and yet——”

“Yet what?”

“If she have got a lover, why should she make a mystery of the matter? I suppose all girls get lovers. It is the common lot.”

“Faith, no; I fancy you are wrong in that conclusion. As one of your own beautiful songs makes a neglected maid say—

“‘*I never was guilty of refusing many,
For, the Lord knows my heart, I’d be thankful for any.*’

That is right. In the present imperfect state of society there is not a Jack for every Jill — besides, some Jills get too many Jacks."

"After all," said Mr. Brisco, "Abigail's thoughts may be tending in quite another direction. It is possible she has grown weary of the old house."

"Her weariness must be of very recent date then," commented Mr. Katzen.

"The change *is* recent. Formerly, as you know, she picked up scraps of learning in an irregular, desultory manner. Without much application she——"

"Contrived to get herself wonderfully well educated," finished Mr. Katzen.

"But yet not thoroughly, Now, however, she is devoting every spare moment to the acquisition of languages——"

"Languages! What languages?"

"Well, amongst others—German——"

"Ach Gott—that is good!" exclaimed Mr. Katzen. "And she used to tell me it was the tag, rag, and bobtail—the very dregs of all the tongues confounded at Babel. 'No other nation could be found to take it,' she

would say, 'and so the Germans were forced to have that or nothing.'

"My faith, the Germans have made something out of it since Babel,' I assured her; and then she mocked and cried, 'Bah!'"

"Relations between you do not appear, even on your own showing, to have been very cordial," remarked Mr. Brisco.

The new Consul shrugged his shoulders.

"Among friends, you know——" he said, and left his visitor to finish the sentence as might seem to him best.

How Mr. Brisco did please to finish it must for ever remain uncertain, as at that instant Mr. Katzen's clerk entered to say a gentleman was in the outer office who wished to see the Consul for New Andalusia at once.

"I will call round," was Mr. Katzen's cheering assurance as Mr. Brisco rose to depart. "Do not disquiet yourself. The little one and I understand each the other. She will keep no secrets from *me*."

END OF VOL. I.





